Fred Chappell: Dance of Shadows

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARCH

The Exciting Conclusion of

The Helper and His Hero

Matthew Hughes

Ron Goulart

Robert Reed

M. Rickert

DISPLAY UNTIL FEB 27

$4.50US $6.50CAN

03>

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When night falls, legends rise.

SCAR NIGHT

By ALAN CAMPBELL

Suspended in chains over a seemingly bottomless abyss, the ancient city of Deepgate holds the fate of tortured souls: one who kills for immortality, one who falls from grace—and one who rises for revenge.

"Utterly marvelous."
–Neil Asher, author of *Prador Moon*

"Murderously beautiful."
–Sharon Shinn, author of *Archangel*

"Intensely involving."
–Sara Ash, author of *Children of the Serpent Gate*

"A gripping, ripping yarn... FANTASY AT ITS BEST."
–Hal Duncan, author of *Vellum*

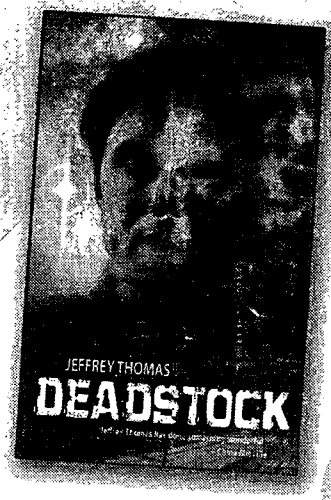
"Richly imagined."
–Greg Keyes, author of *The Blood Knight*

Log onto www.bantamdell.com to sign up for Spectra Pulse, our free monthly eNewsletter.

SPECTRA

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

AVAILABLE MARCH

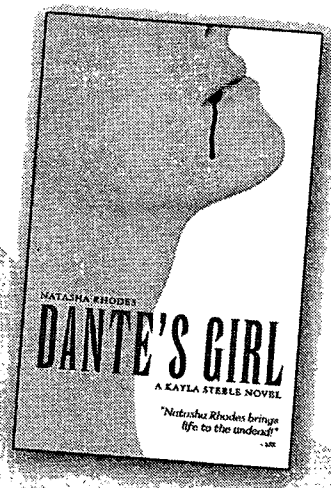


DEADSTOCK
A PUNKTOWN NOVEL
Jeffrey Thomas

978-1-84416-447-9
$7.99 US / $9.99 CAN

In the teeming future city known as Punktown, a private investigator with chameleon-like abilities hunts down an escaped genetic experiment.

"Punktown is searing and alien and anxious and rich, and it is humane, and it is moving. Jeffrey Thomas has done something wonderful."
– *China Mieville, author of* Iron Council



DANTE'S GIRL
Natasha Rhodes

978-1-84416-666-4
$7.99 US / $9.99 CAN

A dark, sexy adventure-filled novel that explores the supernatural underbelly of life in contemporary LA.

"Taut and gripping, Natasha Rhodes's prose is that precious thing: the stuff you just can't put down."
– *Dan Abnett, bestselling author of* Horus Rising

SOLARIS
SCIENCE FICTION · FANTASY · DARK FANTASY

For more information and free first chapters visit
WWW.SOLARISBOOKS.COM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
March • 58th Year of Publication

NOVELLAS

THE HELPER AND HIS HERO, PART 2 69 **Matthew Hughes**

NOVELETS

DANCE OF SHADOWS 6 **Fred Chappell**

THE DEVIL BATS WILL BE A LITTLE LATE THIS YEAR 136 **Ron Goulart**

SHORT STORIES

MAGIC WITH THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOYS 50 **Robert Reed**

MEMOIR OF A DEER WOMAN 126 **M. Rickert**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 38 **Charles de Lint**

BOOKS 43 **Elizabeth Hand**

FILMS: THE MAGIC OF LOST LOVES AND CRUSHED CANARIES 120 **Kathi Maio**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 160

CURIOSITIES 162 **Douglas A. Anderson**

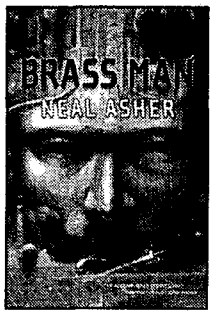
CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (119), Danny Shanahan (135).
COVER BY CORY AND CATSKA ENCH FOR "THE HELPER AND HIS HERO"

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor JOHN J. ADAMS, Assistant Editor
CAROL PINCHEFSKY, Contests Editor JOHN M. CAPPELLO, Newsstand Circulation
The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 112, No. 3, Whole No. 659, March 2007. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2007 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Adventure, Magic and War

New fantasy and science fiction from Tor



Neal Asher

Brass Man

0-765-31731-1 • Trade Paperback

An adrenaline-powered SF adventure about an insane robot brain brought back to life in a shiny new body, ready to kill again.

★ **"Fizzing with intelligent ideas and occasionally streaked with black humor. Appalling, mind-boggling, fascinating—and irresistible."**

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

David B. Coe

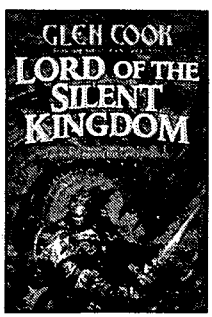
Weavers of War

0-765-31246-8 • Hardcover

In the rousing conclusion of the Winds of the Forelands series, the Qirsi people will be lead by a mysterious Weaver who can bind their magic into a single weapon.

"Coe's writing... is strong, complex, and emotionally very, very powerful."

—Sara Douglass on *Bonds of Vengeance*



Glen Cook

Lord of the Silent Kingdom

0-765-30685-9 • Hardcover

As captain-general of the armies fighting a crusade for Patriarch Sublime V, Piper Hecht will discover that the old, fading gods are determined to maintain control over men.

★ **"Timely and timeless.... The author of the Black Company series brings a stark realism to his tales of imaginary lands."**

—*Library Journal*, starred review on *The Tyranny of the Night*

www.tor.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fred Chappell's story "Hooyoo Love" appeared in our Oct/Nov 2003 issue. He returns now with a fantasy concerning dealers in the shadow trade. This story is part of a series, but the first story — slated for publication in Weird Tales *— might not have appeared yet. Fortunately, you need not have read the first story in order to appreciate this one.*

Dance of Shadows

By Fred Chappell

ASTOLFO, SOMETIMES grudgingly admired as preeminent master of the shadow trade, is avidly sought out by collectors. His attraction is his genius, for he is not physically prepossessing. He will say to me, "Falco, must you loom your bulk over me so lubbardly?" Yet I am but half a head taller than the plumpish, sparse-haired, nimble man and my weight, at about fifteen stone, cannot be much greater than his. It is my office to take all such comments, including the many others more acerbic, in good part, for after all, it was my own conceit to apprentice to him. Four long seasons I had been trying to learn the skill, craft, and finally the art of shadows and if I were to advance in my ambition, Astolfo must be the one to teach me. I felt now almost as muddled as at first, when I broke into his mansion to prostrate myself before his tolerance and be taken into his service.

He once spoke a little in general about the vice of collecting. He seemed to be talking at idle random, but I found out early that he never spoke desultorily. "For it *is* a vice, you know," he said and looked at me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with that gray-eyed gaze that so rarely gave away the cast of his humor. "I have known many a man to waste his substance upon trifles. He may bestow a fortune upon a trove of essence-bottle stoppers, upon elegant sword-hilt pommels, upon coins of fabled nations in fabled ages past. Then these connoisseurs expire in mortal fashion and their impoverished descendants scatter those spurious treasures to the round of the compass for a fraction of the true worth. This collecting, Falco, is a costly vanity."

"I take it that you make an exception for the collectors of shadows."

"Shadow collectors may be the worst of the lot," he replied. "For not only do the objects themselves extort fat prices, but a discriminating taste for them is difficult and expensive to acquire. And then there are the further costs of proper care and storage and restoration when that is necessary and possible."

"Yet you derive some large part of your income from collectors."

"Ah." He sighed and blinked. "I lead a superfluous existence. And I cannot fathom why you feel attracted to such an inutile way of life."

I might have talked at length of the fascination that the business of shadows held for me, why it stood in my mind as the subtlest, cleverest, most demanding method of maintaining oneself. But I also knew better than to give my sharp-tongued mentor reason to ply me with sarcasm. I only inquired what he thought he might occupy himself with otherwise.

"Why, I should retire entirely from commerce," said he, "and devote myself to the close study of the ancient mages. I would strive to achieve equanimity of mind and equability of temper. I would exercise to be always cheerful in this world of futile strife."

"Most who know you would say that you have already arrived at the goals you aim at. You are hardly a melancholy man."

"A long face discourages custom," he declared. "If my clients see me downcast, they may suspect I fret over an unsound business and carry their trade elsewhere."

"So then, your talk is not pure philosophical disquisition. We have a venture in hand, do we?"

"We do." He had not objected to the plural pronoun.

"And it has to do with the pursuit of shadow collecting?"

"As soon as you have made your appearance presentable to polished

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

company, we shall go to the house of Ser Plermio Rutilius," Astolfo said. "I shall tell you about him as we travel."

"Will Mutano accompany us?" I asked. If Astolfo felt the need of his mute, large manservant so fierce in combat, we might be entering a situation of some danger.

"No," he replied. "If our host saw the three of us together he might doubt of my capacities. You shall answer well enough as a diverting companion and no more than that. He will see that you are harmless; Mutano does not readily present that aspect."

I bowed acquiescence, hoping he would note that my ironic grimace expressed disagreement.

Our travel was accomplished in handsome style, for Ser Rutilius had sent a well appointed coach-and-two to Astolfo's mansion to fetch us the two leagues to his chateau. As we rolled smoothly through the green springtime countryside, Astolfo informed me that our host was the scion of an ancient race of warriors who hired out to duchies, principalities, and kingdoms to protect them from marauders, enemies and friends alike. Since our province of Tlemia had blundered into peaceful times, there had been naught to occupy the hereditary skills and services of Rutilius. And so, as a young man, he had entertained himself with dissipation, gathering from cellars their sumptuous wines, from tailors their most costly and elaborate cloaks and doublets, and from noble families their comeliest, most complaisant females.

"In short," said Astolfo, "he led such a life as you have dreamed of leading, Falco — idle pleasures following upon one another like raindrops in a sweet shower. And do you not dream of it still?"

I did not respond.

"But Rutilius is an intelligent young noble and in due season found these devices to pall. He educated himself in the sciences and the arts. He raised the farming practices of his estates to extraordinary levels; he has renewed and refined his martial skills; he has become a knowledgeable connoisseur of painting and tapestry, statuary and architecture. His senses and apprehensions having become so acute, it was perhaps inevitable that he should come to pursue shadow collecting, for no other cultivated attainment is so difficult to achieve. But, as it is the most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

expensive of such follies, so is it the most rewarding, for, as you have discovered, it is infinite in interest and delight."

I would assent to this latter assertion while envying the fact that one in Rutilius's station could become an adept of shadows without enduring the physical discomforts the discipline was inflicting upon me.

Astolfo seemed to have overheard my thought. "You must not think him some soft-handed, sweet-scented dilettante. He is an expert swordsman, an avid huntsman, a canny and alert man of business, and a fearless pugilist. Of his prowess with women I have heard nothing. Perhaps one of your town wenches has whispered to you whereof."

I shook my head.

"Well then, we understand that whatever commission he may propose to us must be a tangled one because the man himself is so very able and has such deep resources to command."

"Yes," I said, "and from these resources he can well afford whatever toplofty fee you may ask."

"It is for that reason we have come," Astolfo said, "for I am well past the age when mere difficulty itself is an attraction.... And so, here are we."

The carriage rolled to a stop, the driver opened the door and assisted us down the gilt steps he had deployed, and we stood in a pleasant greensward before the great oaken doors of the chateau.

WE WERE BROUGHT to the presence of Rutilius in a foyer almost immediately inside the doors. The foyer spread large, with a high, arched ceiling of cedarwood, and enclosed a circular area three steps below the main floor. This sunken space contained a small pool lined with blue tile in which red and silver carp wafted long, filmy tails. Flowers and trailing vines spilled from the mouths of sand-cast urns. From an adjoining room a lute not visible to us was being played with gentle and pensive hand.

I had thought that the mansion of Astolfo, where it stood with its gardens and lawn and stable near the center of the port city of Tardocco, must be close to the apex of luxury. Now I knew that however large the fortune Astolfo had amassed, it was to the fortune of Rutilius as a ploughman's handful of seed is to a granary.

But Rutilius showed himself, however, as no pompous or overbearing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sort. A slender, sandy-haired man in his mid-thirties with a manner easy and open, he seemed sincerely pleased to acquaint himself with us, though I noticed that he did not offer his hand. Yet his ease in his station was so confident that this oversight bore no hint of arrogance. He did offer the customary welcoming glass of wine, as fine as any I have tasted since.

The preliminary conversation consisted of our host and Master Astolfo trading reminiscences and guarded confidences about mutual friends and acquaintances. Ser Rutilius was sounding out Astolfo for his society connections, inquiring about the health of Princess A and the new foal in the stable of Count Z. The shadow master bantered his way through this testing, showing familiarity with the persons and affairs of one and all, but without giving impression he gossiped.

Rutilius broke off these preliminaries sharply. "Have you some inkling why I desired to meet you?"

"I have supposed you wished to acquire my services."

"Do you know in what regard? You must answer this question truthfully."

"I have no slightest notion," Astolfo replied mildly.

An expression of relief passed over the face of the baron. "I am pleased to hear you say so. I have feared that my comportment of late has given me away. There are those who observe me closely for any sign of weakness."

"Ah then," said Astolfo, "now I shall suppose it is some affair of the affections. I must tell you straightway, Ser Rutilius, that I am no mender of broken hearts. Nor, come to that, am I a broker of mended hearts."

"In neither case could I use your skills," Rutilius said. "But come along with me to another room. Let me fill your glasses once more and you shall fetch them with you."

"Thank you. It is a inspiriting vintage," Astolfo said.

Having regenerated our drink, Rutilius led us from the foyer down a long, tapestry-hung gallery and brought us into a small salon. Intricate carpets smothered large areas of the parquetry floor, ensuring a sleepy degree of quiet. Large windows admitted southern light and gave an impression of openness to the room. But it was the walls that we had come to see. Paintings and drawings covered them in close profusion. Some paintings were life-size portraits; some drawings were not much larger than Astolfo's leopard's-head belt buckle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I marveled at them. The portraiture of shadows is the most demanding and delicate of the pictorial arts and the most skillful of artists might labor an arduous season to produce even a mediocre rendering. Here every example was a masterpiece. One or two I recognized from engraved reproductions in books, but all the others were new to my eyes and this first impression of them all together made the hairs stand up on my wrists.

Astolfo, whose constant watchword was *nil mirari*, gave over to rapt admiration, going from one frame to another, stepping forward and back, cocking his head to one side, shading his eyes with his left hand. I had never before seen him so avidly engaged and wondered if this display might be partly a show of manners, a way of complimenting Rutilius on his taste.

I also noted that the baron observed Astolfo attentively and seemed gratified when the shadow master kept returning to one drawing. Among the other, more imposing pictures, this one at first looked none so remarkable. It was no larger than a sheet of foolscap, a rendering of the shadow of a female in graphite and chalk. But the more I looked at it, the more it unfolded not only its artistic beauties but also an ineffable, closely personal charm that must have derived from its subject.

In spite of all the instruction Astolfo has set me to, the examination of scores of paintings and drawings in the collections of his clients, the volumes of prints and engravings, the crabbed treatises on the pictorial art, I have not sufficient knowledge to speak with any wisdom. I believe anyhow that pictures speak for themselves and much that is said in their presence by ink-smeared daubers and chalky schoolmasters is so much vain bleating. I would rather hear a goat fart than to listen to doddering know-alls speak of composition, impasto, contrapposto, and the other drivel.

From Astolfo's scattered remarks, however, I learned some good, practical sense, especially in regard to the picturing of shadows. First, he told me, your shadow artist must learn how to show *volume*, the dimensions of bodies in space. It is a childish error to see shadows flat, as unlit two-dimensional strips pasted to surfaces. The first task is to see that for all their seeming insubstantiality shadows have volume and extend round in three dimensions, to which — unlike solid bodies such as stones and trees — they add another surface borrowed from the ultramundane source

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to which they are allied. At the time, I could not see what he was asking me to see, but to this simple-seeming drawing his words fitly applied. The contours of the figure seemed to rise from the sheet on which they were limned. The shadow was modeled on paper as if it were a study for a sculpture in bronze or glass.

Astolfo spoke to Rutilius in a voice even milder than usual. "I take it that these works represent properties in your possession."

"All but a few are renderings of shadows I have gathered," Rutilius replied. "There are one or two works I acquired for their excellence as art. Some of those are quite old."

"Indeed," Astolfo said, "for I see that some were signed by the artists. There is a Manoni by the door and in the painting next to it the little salamander scrawled into the corner of the canvas is the sign of the celebrated Proximo. But the newer ones are unsigned."

"Shadow artists discovered that noising their names abroad was unsafe practice," Rutilius said.

"Yet there are some so skilled, so deep-thoughted, so individual that their work speaks their names. For instance, that drawing of the young female's shadow must have come from the hand of Petrinius. He is our contemporary genius of shadows and his touch is unmistakable."

"You are correct."

"I see too that this drawing is fresh. You must have come by it recently."

"He completed it only a sennight past."

"And the shadow itself is in your possession?"

"It is."

"I congratulate you. That shadow is a treasure to make any collector proud."

"Proud, perhaps. But not entirely happy."

"The reason?"

"I have a great, an overweening, desire to know what woman cast this shadow and where she is."

"Did not your purveyor tell you these things?"

"He did not know, for the one he got it from did not. It is possible that it passed through many hands before it came into mine."

Astolfo stepped forward and leaned for a closer view of the drawing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Perhaps. It is difficult to tell from a drawing. If I were to see the original — "

Rutilius said, "Before I chance showing the property I shall need to know if you accept my commission and what your terms may be."

"You wish me to find out about the person who cast the shadow?"

"I want you to find her, the woman herself, and tell me who and what and where she is."

"I can accept your tender only provisionally," Astolfo said, "because I cannot foresee what may be involved. A tedious, long search might be necessary and might prove fruitless."

"True enough. Yet you are the most experienced hound in the kennel to set upon the trace. Your renown must have been well earned. And you should be fitly rewarded."

"Provisionally, then — yes. Let us see the original. Then I may say more."

In this other smaller salon that opened off the collection room, I could discern that Astolfo admired the way in which Rutilius tended his shadows. Some collectors and dealers believe that shadows should be put away in secret recesses — closets, armoires, cellars — so that the surrounding darkness might keep them fresh. But darkness drains them of vitality, gradually absorbing a little of their natural vigor. A dim light is best, light that is not a steady glow but a fluctuating or flickering convergence of beams. These varying conditions keep the shades exercised, furnish them tone, and lend them suppleness. Their odors keep cleaner in a light like unto that of an overcast day and their edges are less likely to lose definition than if they are stored away in some dank hole.

For his most dearly prized shadow Ser Rutilius had ordered the construction of a special cabinet. It was a hand taller than myself and its glass sides enclosed an array of lightly smoked and unsmoked mirrors where the shadow floated among them in an ever-changing, vague light. These mirrors revolved slowly by means of a clockwork mechanism attached to the side of the cabinet. The shadow hung amid their surfaces like those carp wafting in the tiled pool in the foyer.

Astolfo walked three times round this cabinet, leaning this way and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that to see the different angles. I could tell that he was considering how he might construct such a machine himself. I noted too that his gaze often left the glass box and its shadow to take in Ser Rutilius.

The baron must have looked upon this sight some thousand times and more, yet now he stood transfixed, again devouring it with his eyes. He had hooked his thumbs into his brocaded linen sash and his fingers played restlessly, hungrily, upon the band of cloth.

Well, it drifted there in ineffable beauty. There was about it such refinement and grace, such a lilting freedom, that it lightened the heart. Astolfo has described some of the most beautiful of shadows as being music, and, to speak in that vein, this one was a cool, clear soprano aria of purest tone. I was not so deeply enamored of it as our host; my taste is for the darker shade, the more satin-like texture, the deeper fabric. But for those who prefer the shadow that verges on the edge of disappearance, an image that is but the whisper-echo of an image, this shade was paragon. And it required some time well after Astolfo had finished his examination before our host was able to tear himself away.

"Any collector," Astolfo began, "of the greatest wealth or noblest blood, would consider this shadow his crown jewel."

"And so for me it is — and more than that," Rutilius replied.

"Your love for the object has persuaded me," Astolfo said. "I will accept the commission, as long as I am not bound to guarantee favorable result."

"And your fee?"

"I cannot tell that yet, but it will not discommode you."

In the coach as we rode back to our manse, Astolfo said, "This is to be a delicate business. We must tread gently. We shall have to require from Ser Rutilius a bond for our safety from his hand."

"Why should he wish to harm us?" I asked.

"Because lovers are madmen and may do violence in a passion. Did you not see how he looked upon the thing? He is in love."

"With a shadow?"

"In his mind he sees beyond the shadow."

"How so?"

"He has imagined the woman who spilled upon the air so graceful, so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lissome, so lyrical a shade and this picture he has imagined has fastened upon his heart like a kestrel taking a minnow."

"You make him out a blushing virgin," I said, "but someone of his position — "

"A man who has had his fill of women in the flesh, who has tired of their jangle in his ear, their depletion of his purse, their weight upon his loins, may perhaps seek a different and higher experience with a shadow-woman."

"The caster is no shadow. She is flesh and bone like the rest of us."

"Flesh and bone, yes — but not like you and me."

"How do you mean?"

"What sort of person will cast so delicate a shadow?"

I pondered. "Some saintly lass, maybe. An ascetic student or a devoted temple maiden."

Astolfo nodded, but his expression was dubious. "A prophetess — except that those figures rarely attain to gracefulness and when they do, their grace is in a strongly individual, eccentric mode. The movements of this shadow have a high degree of finesse unavailable to the temperament of the hermit."

"You speak as if you have formed conclusions as to the identity of this female."

"A thin conjecture, no more. Let us try to lure the artist who drew the shadow to our dinner table for tomorrow eve."

"Petrinius? He will not come. He is said to disdain all company but his own."

"And even with that he is none too pleased. Yet I think he might make an exception for our invitation. At any rate, we shall send it round."

THE SILENT, broad-shouldered Mutano ushered Petrinius into the large library where Astolfo and I stood by the great fireplace awaiting his arrival. It was too warm an evening for fire so Astolfo had ordered the hearth-space cleared and had installed small marble genius-of-flame statuettes within. From various rooms and corners of the mansion he had brought all his best works of art — paintings, drawings, tapestry screens, ceramic fooleries, ornately bound books — and distributed them around

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the room. He evidently thought it worth trying to impress our distinguished artist guest.

He even began, after the usual greetings, to make a witty speech of welcome, but Petrinius cut him short. "I came to eat your meat and drink your wine and to hear what sort of business you have with me, Astolfo. Let us not waste the hour with rhetorizing."

He was unperturbed and held Petrinius in one of the mildest of his mild gazes, unruffled by the artist's calculated gaucherie, a commodity he seemed to possess in abundant store. Petrinius was a short, almost dwarfish man whose gestures were swift and jerky. I could imagine him as a marionette whose strings were manipulated by a palsied puppeteer. He abounded with nervous energy; it crackled from him as from amber rubbed with lynx fur. His fingers twitched, his feet stuttered on the worn carpet. When he spoke, the words flew like darts and when he was silent his face betrayed his every thought and impulse in a succession of grimaces. One of the popular sobriquets bestowed upon him was "Candleflame," and he did indeed flicker with a fiery spirit, every motion animated.

"I am pleased that you have come to drink my wine," Astolfo said. He poured from a dragon-spout flagon a draught of aromatic inky wine for each of us.

Petrinius tossed his down his gullet and at once held forth his glass to be filled again.

"I feel no urgency to broach my question," Astolfo said as he poured the proffered glass to the brim, "for I believe you already know what I wish to ask."

Again, Petrinius drained the draught with one noisy swallow and again put forward the silver-enchased goblet. "This will be in the matter of the drawing commissioned by Ser Plermio Rutilius. Am I correct?"

"You are correct," Astolfo said. He smiled gently as again he filled the glass.

"I do not think we can content each other. I have no real knowledge of the shadow to impart and the little I do know must come at a cost to you. I believe you already divine what that would be."

"A certain shadow," Astolfo said, "or, more accurately, a portion of it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes."

"It must be that you are still designing your great mural. What is the title you have given this long-planned masterwork?"

"At present it is called 'The Dead Who March to Shame the State.' Tomorrow it may take a different name. What do you offer me for the bit I can tell?"

"Of the shadow of Malaspino a cutting two fingers'-length in breadth. More, if your replies answer to my desire."

"What, then?"

"Do you think Ser Rutilius says true that he knows nothing of the provenance of that shadow you so brilliantly sketched?"

"Do not spend your breath upon flattery. I am aware of my capacities. It is in the interest of Rutilius to tell the truth. Why should he deceive you, his hireling, in the matter?"

Even the mean term, *hireling*, did not discompose Astolfo. "The way of shadow-dealing is as crooked as the shaft of the Great Wain. Did you form any surmises about where it came from?"

"Let us forego catechism," Petrinius said brusquely. "These things I know from observing the object itself: It passed through few hands before it came to Rutilius; it is fresh and without wear or soilure; its character is distinct. I would think the thief entrusted it to a middleman with Rutilius in mind as the sole buyer."

"The one who took the shadow was no thief by vocation or the middleman would have gained the name of the caster from him as a means of protecting himself."

"Of course, of course." Petrinius waved an impatient hand. "It implies too that the price the middleman obtained and the shadow he kept for himself were of secondary importance to the taker. He wanted chiefly to be rid of the thing."

"Yet not from fear, for the shadow is that of a young woman who could offer little harm."

"Unless she had lover, brother, or some other protector who would pursue the taker."

Astolfo nodded. "And yet — "

"And yet sufficient time has passed and no one has appeared. And I have some conceit that the lass might be an outcast or orphan."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A slave girl, mayhap?"

"She is no clumsy bumpkin like your man here," Petrinius said, with a quick contemptuous gesture in my direction. "She has a grace not entirely inherent. She has been cultivated after some fashion."

"As I thought also."

"You have thought already all the things I have said. Did you call me here merely to annoy me? Lead me to the table. I will eat my fill and depart." He held out his goblet again.

Astolfo complied, saying, "We shall dine on trout and sorrel, lamb and flageolets shortly. The cook must set his own time to bring us to table. I promise you will not regret his tediousness in the matter."

"Even the most savory of meals is but fuel for the body's brazier," Petrinius said. Then he looked directly into my face and I saw for the first time that his eyes were of different colors, the left an opaque, steely gray, the right a brilliant ice-blue. "Has this briar-muncher learned the difference between mutton stew and oat straw? He would seem to be ill fitted for your machinations, Astolfo."

"Oh, Falco does well enough. He only requires a bit of polish."

"As does mule flop, but polish never alters its value."

"At what weight would you estimate the shadow's caster?"

"No more than eight stone. She will be right-handed, though in walking she will favor her left side. The bones of her arms and especially of her feet will be prominent, her instep a high arch. She is capable of swift movement and also of holding a set pose for a long while. The carriage of her shoulders is almost military in its steadiness and serves to emphasize a long, graceful neck. Her hands are puzzling to me; sometimes I think them too small for her body, sometimes too large."

"How was the shadow stolen from her? Forcefully, with a sudden violence? Or slowly and carefully, when she was unaware?"

"Not by violence. And yet not gradually either. The edges are not abrupt, yet neither are they vague in boundary."

"I will give over three finger-breadths of the shadow of Malaspino. And now we have done with this subject and you may speak at length of the plan of your mural."

"It is to be dark, gloomy dark, in its center. Only the shadow of an evil man taken from him as he stood upon the gallows will supply the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

necessary blackness. You were on the scaffold with Malaspino, were you not? I have heard the rumors."

"Since all excepting myself now are dead, I can affirm them. I bribed one of the hangmen to keep at home. I wore his robe and the filthy hood he lent. It was his duty to bind the feet of Malaspino just before the trap was sprung and when I knelt to the bonds, I slipped the shadow away at his bootsoles. I have never seen so black a shadow. The doomful poet Edgardo has been using minute parts of it as an admixture to his inkwell for some time now and his lines grow ever more ominous and sardonic."

"You allude to his poem, 'Chance,' of course. 'Bow down before the daemon of the world — This monstrous god, half idiot and half ape.... '"

"And to other poems he judges too bitter for auditors of our generation."

"Methinks he too much prides himself," Petrinius said. "Let him bring them at will, I shall swill his strongest alcohols."

"Since your appetite is so keen, let us go in to dinner," said Astolfo. "My nose tells me the dishes are in readiness. We must speak more of your great mural."

He was not loathe to do so. Between bold goblets of wine and weighty forkfuls of meat, Petrinius spun out at length his scheme for his beloved project. The name of it kept changing as he warmed to the subject. Sometimes he called it The Triumphal March of Justice Upon the Contemptible Species; another time it was The Furies Well Deserved, or Look Upon Us for What We Are. It was to be his revenge upon history as he knew it, upon life, regarded more as a crime than an affliction. "There shall appear upon my wall figures who will recognize their shames and wail in anger."

"'Twill be a most passionate masterpiece."

"Passion, yes, passion!" Petrinius sputtered fragments of lamb. "I shall put into it all my brimstone heart and all the skills of hand and eye."

"Will not the images you thus produce work ill upon the actual subjects?" Astolfo asked. "For I have heard it told of Manoni his art was so powerful that when he drew in ill will a person's likeness, that one fell sick. Some, they say, came near death."

"Pah." Petrinius took a generous swallow of wine. "Those are legends

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

merely. Old superstitions. And I am not certain that Manoni deserves all his musty repute. I can show you clumsy passages in his best work."

"So then, it is not true that an artist's portrayal may alter the condition of his subject? I had always heard otherwise."

"It is not true, though many of the brotherhood promote the falsity. But of shadows, however, it is a truth. It can come about that the portrait of a shadow can affect the appearance of that shade, for good or for ill."

"I see. Is it the passion of the artist which effects this result?"

"That is one of the things, but now I perceive you work to worm secrets from me. Yet I am no longer thirsty or hungry and so will depart."

"Mayn't we tempt you with one thing more? A sweet wine of the Sunshine Isles? A fresh melon?"

"Useless to squander fine manners on me, Astolfo. I bid you good night."

After Petrinius had taken his brusque and slightly tipsy leave, brandishing happily above his head a moleskin packet containing his patch from the shadow of Malaspino, Astolfo proposed that we go into the small library for a last glass to invite slumber. Mutano was already there and sat at his ease by the writing table. A decanter of sherry and three small glasses stood ready.

At first Astolfo and Mutano conferred in one of their finger dialects with which I was unfamiliar and I wondered what their discussion concerned. Astolfo poured and we sipped in a momentary, contemplative silence. Then he turned to me: "What did we discover this evening?"

"That this Petrinius is eager to have his ears boxed," I said. "His artistry, however estimable on paper and canvas, does not extend to courtesy."

"Yes, he too referred to you as a cowherd chaff-brain. You are recognized in every place."

"Under your tutelage I shall become an urbane scholar, a polished wit and silken murmurer of vain compliment," I said. "You shall yet be proud of your creation."

My little sally must have caught him unawares, for he paused to consider. "There might be something in this wide apprehension to your advantage. It is rarely a mistake to appear less able than you are. The more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

willing others are to think you a fool, the more you should strive to appear so."

I nodded. His words strengthened my hope that our association might yet continue for a while.

Astolfo went on: "What physical attributes did you observe that would contribute to his power as an artist?"

"I am surprised at his comportment. He is a creature of jerks and starts, wriggles and itchings. He contorts his body as continually and absurdly as his facial expressions, yet his drawing is easy and gossamer; it seems to have been breathed upon the page."

"We cannot suppose that the man who swills grape and wolfs dripping at table is the same as he who stands before the easel. Once he engages the discipline of his craft, his demeanor and personality will change. The priest who expounds a pious and arcane theology in the morning is not the same as the identical priest you encounter that evening in the drunken brothel."

"He coils and uncoils like an adder in embers."

"To aid his way of seeing. Did you not take notice of his eyes?"

"They are of different colors."

"The clear blue is quick and precise. The left eye, colored like the iron of a dagger-blade, was shattered blind in a street brawl. He has to move his head continuously to see things in the round. The loss of sight in one eye has given him an advantage in depicting shadows."

"He has, then, acquired a valuable infirmity."

"He has made it valuable. His infirmities and eccentricities are avidly cultivated. His aloofness of manner and careless speech signal an independent spirit free of sycophancy and this bravura elevates the fees he commands. Where another might eat toads to gain favor, Petrinius spits venom and is the more prized. His great mural when finished will stand as one of the most powerful of misanthropic statements. Many in this city shall be furious to recognize themselves therein. If he include representations of their shadows, those will suffer sad decline. The scrap of shadow from the felon Malaspino has lent him more power. Some high-placed persons will be savagely drawn in."

"'Tis risky," I said. "Some there are of the nobility would have him taken off the planet if he set them crossgrain."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He depends upon his genius to protect him. Did you note what he said about how the shade was thieved in the first place?"

"He did not know. He said it was neither taken by force nor eased away quietly and subtly."

"You know the first two ways in which shadows are taken?"

"By stealth," I said, "and that is called *severance*. By violence, and that is called *sundering*. The third I do not know, as you have not yet informed me."

"Yet you might easily think it out for yourself. How do you acquire a possession of another and leave no trace of theft?"

I was momentarily perplexed. "Well, I suppose, if someone gave the thing to me — "

"If you voluntarily allow someone to take your shadow, it leaves no trace of theft or even of the act of taking. This act is called the *surrendering*."

"People do not lightly give up their shadows," I replied. "Under what circumstance would anyone do so?"

"That is the question I shall put to myself as I sleep. If my pillow is as informative as I hope it shall be, perhaps the three of us may need to wander about the city tomorrow," Astolfo said. He and Mutano began their silent colloquy again, their fingers flashing like a flock of sparrows in a mulberry.

I left them at it, retired to my solitary, almost barren room, undressed, bedded myself, and slept like a sentry relieved from a six-sandglass watch.

ON THE NEXT MORNING, after my customary lone and frugal breakfast, I was standing in the east garden. My eyes were closed as I turned round and round, judging the placement of the shadows there. It is an error to suppose, as I had done before entering apprenticeship, that comprehension of shadows is exclusively a matter of the eye. All the senses are engaged. I listened to the breezes as they mingled darker and lighter tints together; I smelled the differences between those plants that were in the shade of wall or tree and those that stood in full sun; I tasted the perfumes of the air with the tip of my tongue; I felt on my face the dapple that fell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

upon me through the newly leaved plane tree. I heard with special pleasure birdsong, how when it pours from the interior darkness of a thick bush, it lightens and rises minutely in pitch as it trills out of the foliage into the bright day.

I thought that I was aware of all around me, but this illusion was rudely dispelled by a sudden, solid, but not vicious kick to my arse. Mutano, comrade and bear-sized manservant, he who looked as if he would lumber when he walked, could move as silently as any midnight wraith. Astolfo had appointed him my drillmaster and he was forever disciplining me to keener attention, with wooden swords, boxing bouts, equestrian exercises, and so forth. I was grateful to him for his boot up my backside. In another, similar situation an actual opponent could have buried a dagger in my spine.

He beckoned me to follow him into the small library where Astolfo sat in a worn leather armchair. He seemed half asleep when we entered and spoke in a lazy, almost slovenly drawl. This was his mode of speech when his mind was occupied with a problem. "My search has not been fruitless," he said, "but its results are uncertain. We shall go within the hour to the workplace of the ballet master Maxinnio. Before we leave, you must drink the pot of tea which has been prepared for you. That will give you excuse and opportunity to examine his establishment. Mutano shall serve as our protector, if need be, and also as observer, for, to say truly, I do not know entirely what to expect of this visit. My instinct of the matter may be correct or it may err. At any rate, you and I shall go unarmed, but Mutano will bear his short sword.... And so, prepare."

As I was bidden, I went to my room, performed brief ablutions, put on a clean doublet, and downed in hasty gulps the pot of tea that had been set out. Then I joined Astolfo and Mutano in the front of the great hall and we departed. Astolfo, I noted, had changed attire and was dressed in the customary gold-and-green trunks and doublet of a spice merchant. If he hoped to disguise himself, this clothing would not suffice. Master-of-shadows Astolfo was recognized by everyone in the city of Tardocco.

The door to Maxinnio's establishment was a shabby, unvarnished affair of oak boards with a small square cut out to see through. It was opened by a girl of ten or twelve years or so in a gray scullery smock; she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was unremarkable except for the great, dark, almond-shaped eyes set in her young, impassive face. The eyes seemed older than the smudged face, a feature apart. Silently she showed us up the stairs to the studio salon.

Here were a half-dozen young girls stretching legs and torsos, clothed in the traditional white tights and frilly short skirts. Ranging in age from perhaps twelve to sixteen years, they leapt and pirouetted under the cold eye of a gray-haired chorus mistress. Maxinnio sat upon a campaign stool, looking without much interest upon the girls. The bored lutenist in his spare, wooden chair did not so much as glance at them.

Nor did Astolfo, as he hurried over to bow to Maxinnio and to press his unenthusiastic hand. Mutano and I gave each of the girls close and furtive examination, as we had been instructed to do. For me, such instruction was superfluous. These were remarkably pretty girls, in the very dawning of their beauty. I tried to ignore distraction, to concentrate on what I was looking out for.

"Strange colors for a shadow-thief to wear, Astolfo," Maxinnio said. "Why such a gaudy getup so early in the day?"

"Is it not jolly? I am happy that my thieving days, if ever there had been any, should lie behind me so that I can sport such livery as this. Today my green-and-gold signifies that I am just now in the service of another, a wealthy spice merchant who does not care to have his identity bruited about."

"What have I to do with spice merchants, whatever motley they require you to wear?"

"He is wealthy and that datum must interest you."

"How so?"

"Because he is considering whether he may wish to invest funds in your company of dancers."

"Did you bring this mass of gold with you, Astolfo, so that you require two ruffians to guard the treasure you bear? Your dumb manservant I have seen before, this Mutton, or whatever he is called."

"Mutano," Astolfo said. "He is the most discreet of persons."

"Let him keep so. But who is this clay-foot ox-goader by his side? He looks as if grasshoppers might spring from his codpiece."

"He enjoys to be called Falco and I perceive he is in a state of discomfort. I think he may have been swilling ale even at this early hour

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and, if so, shall not be in my service by this afternoon. Perhaps there is a place here where he may relieve himself."

"Out the door and down the long hall to the end he will find a pissing room. If some girl has engaged it, he must hold his water until she leaves," he said, and added: "I do not like the look of this Falco."

"I plan to improve his appearance," Astolfo said and waved me away.

Mutano's bitter tea had worked its way with me so that I fairly trotted down the gloomy hall to an open door within which stood a row of four stoneware pissing jars. No female was in the room, so I closed the door and went about my business, making sure, according to instruction, that my urination would be audible even through the walls. Anyone set to watch me would be satisfied with the legitimacy of my need.

Afterward, I stood listening for a moment, then stole to the door and opened it gradually. The hall was deserted and I went into it, going along slowly and silently, stopping by each of the doors to listen for any sound within.

At the end of the hall was a stairway and I fancied that music sounded from the floor above. I mounted quietly to the door that closed off the stairs at the top. Here I heard distinctly the soft strains of harp music. When I tried to ease the door open, I found it locked and was gratified. To pry back this lock with a short strap of stiff leather was the work of brief moments and anyone inside would be unlikely to guard closely a locked door.

When I inched it ajar and peeped through I could see clearly because a panel of the roof was drawn back and daylight poured down upon a lank, abstracted youth with curly locks who sat playing his harp as if rapt by the music he produced. A girl dressed all in white tights to her neck danced in the sunlight. She did not wear the usual pleated dancer's skirt.

She could not be above sixteen years and so slender within the white sheath she wore that she looked like a spiral curl of silver as she made a slow turn with her hands held aloft. On her toes she barely touched the floor and so weightless-seeming were her motions that a puff of air might have carried her up and away like the downy dandelion seed. She looked upward, following the line of her arms to her small, long-fingered hands, and her blonde hair hung long and free down her back. She would be the principal dancer of Maxinnio's troupe and she danced in the shaft of light

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as the spirit of loneliness, as if she were the only being in a separate world. I felt that in looking upon her I looked upon my own spirit as I sometimes conceived it in melancholy humor — alone and uncompanioned in a moment of halted time, in a place that could not be reached from ordinary space. If every human soul is an orphan, as Astolfo once averred, this young girl embodied the soul of that soul.

I watched her, transfixed for long moments, before I recognized one of the things that caused her to emit such an atmosphere of solitude. Although she danced within a wide beam of full daylight, she cast no shadow on the polished maple floor. Shadowless, she seemed to burn in her space, a cool, silver flame as pure as starlight frozen in ice. The absence of a shadow attached her more closely to the music; she seemed a part of the music, as if when the harpist gently rippled his strings, he was caressing her body with his fingertips, bringing from her, and not his instrument, the strains and measures that fell upon my ears.

With difficulty I brought myself away down the stairs and returned to the salon where Maxinnio and Astolfo held conference among the other dancers. All the way back through the dim, grimy hallway the sight of the silver dancer floated before me. When I came into the room with the harsher light and the different music and the prancing girls, the sensation was disagreeable. Everything, and especially the dancers, seemed tawdry and dull and clumsy. Aforetime I had found the room pleasant enough, but now it was immediately stale, flat, and tiresome.

Astolfo greeted me. "Well, Falco, you have been gone a good long space. I must congratulate you on your bladder capacity. Perhaps we shall engage for you in a pissing tournament."

"It was tea and not ale that I had drunk," I said. "My innards are not so avid to entertain mere tea."

"Must we spend more time hearing how your oaf makes water?" asked Maxinnio. "I hold the subject but a shallow one."

"Perhaps we have overstrained your hospitality," said Astolfo. "Now that I have learned from you that you have no desire and no need to open your company to the investment of my client, we may decide our business is concluded."

"It is concluded, Astolfo," Maxinnio declared. "I do not know why you have come knocking upon my door, with unsavory fellows at your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heel, blathering some suppositious story about a spice merchant. Whatever underhand affair you have underway, I am to be left out. And there's an end on't."

"I am sure you know best," Astolfo said. He bowed and then Mutano and I bowed and the gray-smocked, great-eyed girl showed us down the stairs to the street. The lute music grew louder behind us.

When I told Astolfo about the dancer I had spied upon, we sat in his large kitchen. He enjoyed this room with its enormous oven, its walls glowing with copper pans and kettles, its smells of breads and spices. He liked to leap up backward and perch on the huge butcher block in the center and dangle his feet. This he did now as we drank new ale from clay tankards and chewed on black bread and sour goat cheese.

When I finished my account, he closed his eyes and nodded. "The dancing master must have been asked to prepare an important entertainment for the municipality and has designed a particularly gratifying dance. You glimpsed her in rehearsal, Falco, and were transported. The full spectacle shall surely glow famously."

"It is a sight worth living to see," I avowed.

"Maxinnio will not be eager to give over this paragon of dance to Ser Rutilius."

"He will not give her over," I said. "Nor would you once you had set eyes upon her."

"You are certain it is her shadow in the Ser's cage of glass?"

"It can be no other."

"Then we must find out our choices. What would Rutilius do if we delayed awhile and then reported to him that we could not trace the caster of his shadow?"

"He would pay others to discover her."

"How might they do so?"

I thought. "He would tell these others that we had failed. Then they would follow in our footsteps, seeking any sort of intelligence. By that time our visit to Maxinnio's dancers would be known and they would find the silver dancer and inform Rutilius."

"When once Rutilius knew that we had seen her, he would consider that — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

" — That we had betrayed him, having designs of our own. He would not be pleased."

"What of the girl, once he knows where and what she is?"

"He will abduct her, despite all that Maxinnio can do."

"And then?"

I shrugged. "I cannot say. He shall have attained his desire. He shall possess the girl."

"The consequence of this possession?"

"I cannot say."

"There can be but one consequence. Did you gain any impression of her? Not of the dancer, but of the girl apart from the dance?"

I waited, but nothing came to mind. "I think there is no girl apart from the dance."

He blinked his eyes and nodded once, gravely. "Because she casts no shadow. Like the music itself, she casts no shadow. She has been changed like those boys lopped of their coillons to become soprano singers, pure vessels of the art. Apart from her dance, she hardly exists. Petrinius understood this matter. His drawing of the shadow has more vital spirit, more spark of the soul, than does the shadow itself. And the shadow has more substance of spirit than the girl who cast it."

"How does this fact serve Rutilius? I see advantage in it only for Maxinnio and the spectacle he is planning."

"'Twould serve him ill," he said, "and ourselves also. We must look for some other avenue of success or of escape."

"How so?"

He shrugged. "I am a-weary of pondering and drawing up schemes. My wits are not so nimble as formerly. Why do you not tickle the ribs of your ingenuity and produce a plan for us to follow?"

"I shall attempt," I said. I sounded my words out light and eager, trying to disguise my unconfident apprehension.

"We will await with indrawn breath your masterpiece of machination," Astolfo said. "You shall deliver it mid-morning tomorrow."

Well, I would have to prepare some scheme or other for the morrow, that was certain. Certain too was the fact that it would be dismissed by the shadow master as harebrained, lackwitted, and impossible of execution.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So I did not trouble myself deeply about the matter and took his words to imply that this evening was mine to consume in whatever way I desired.

And so I launched out across Tardocco to The Heart of Agate, these days my favored tavern in which to recreate body and mind. It was there, between bouts of tankards and of bed-thumping, during one of those floating moments when I began to doubt the value of such dissipation, that a glimmer of a notion entered my head and I abruptly and unsteadily betook me homeward. It was no thunderbolt conception, but even so I did not want to drown it in ale-engendered forgetfulness.

I ROSE LATE, only just before the appointed hour, composed my corpus as best I could, and went out of doors to greet Astolfo where he sat in the springtime splendor under the great chestnut in the east garden. He eyed me with humorous disdain, shook his head, but said nothing. Mutano, standing by a small rustic table, poured a foaming beaker of ale from a pitcher with a cracked spout. I tried to turn from the sight and smell of it, but he thrust it upon me and I drank and began to feel a little better. He had infused it with some sort of spice that so inflamed the palate I had to fumble for speech when Astolfo put his question.

"You cannot gauge with what eager anticipation we have waited your proposal," he said gaily. "Speak at once and dispel our anxiety."

It hurt to swallow, but after I had done so, I said, "Did not you tell me that Ser Rutilius spent much of his youth in headstrong dissipations and carefree frivolities?"

He made no answer, so I plunged on. "He must have sown wild seed during this time. Perhaps he has fathered one or two that he knows nothing of. Perhaps he could be persuaded that the dancer is one of these, his own daughter."

"What then?"

"Then he can have no use for her as bedmate and will leave her stay as is."

"Yet he already adores her shadow to distraction. Will he not be proud to acknowledge the work of his flesh, seeing what dear loveliness it hath brought forth? Will he not be more avid than ever to have her within his house?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"As his daughter — that is, as his supposed daughter — she may prevail upon him to accede to her wishes."

"And will not a young girl of no fortune, apprenticed to a stiff-willed tyrant of the ballet, be pleased to find a wealthy and doting father and enter into a life of luxurious ease and well being?"

"Not if she be wedded to her dance and its music," I replied. "And that is what I saw when I watched her. It is difficult to imagine that she would give up the art willingly."

"Willingly she gave up her shadow."

Now I began to falter. "But that — that is different...."

He spoke as if from the depths of lassitude, saying the very phrase I had foreknown. "This will not serve. The risks are too threatening." But then he surprised me. "And yet, there is something in't to ponder on. Let us befriend our thoughts a while longer. You can be meditating upon it while Mutano instructs you in the brave art of the whip. The whip is a way of taking shadows you may not yet have considered."

Three days passed in which Astolfo seemed to neglect all this affair, the commission of Ser Rutilius, Maxinnio, and the shadowless dancer. I kept busy, of course; my training seemed never to abate for two hours together. Now the emphasis was on drawing. I had been put for a space of time last twelvemonth to draw the shapes of shadows splayed across irregular surfaces: the shadow of Mutano as he stood at the corner of the clay-walled springhouse in the back garden so that it appeared halved on both walls, the shadow of the black cat Creeper where he crouched by the rough stones of the outer wall, the shadow of my own left hand as it fell upon a clot of harebells.

It was discovered that I possessed no handy talent as a draughtsman, but Astolfo explained that the case was of small moment. This exercise was to train my discernment of the shapes surfaces might make of umbrae; it was a study in recognitions.

But this new regimen of drawing was less a geometry exercise and more in the vein of art. I sat with a sheaf of paper, trying to render likenesses not of shadows but of their casters: garden urns, hyacinths, quince bush, the sleeping form of Creeper, the huge hands of Mutano. Now and again Astolfo would stop by, leaf through a handful of my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drawings, and with a finely pointed length of graphite make swift corrections. Each of his strokes was a revelation and, though I learned much in a short time, it was clear that I was destined to be no Manoni or Petrinius and I felt, as I often had before, that hours were misspent.

I was pleased, therefore, when Astolfo informed me we were to pay another call upon Maxinnio and that I should prepare to answer certain questions that might be put to me. "I do not foresee that he will query you," Astolfo said, "but it is ever best to prepare. You are to recall each detail about the dancer you saw who has no shadow. If you are asked, you must answer truthfully."

"He will not be glad to find we know of her," I said. "If he offer to fight, shall I combat him?"

"I do not think you would fare brilliantly in swordplay with a dancing master. We must soon lesson you in dancing to lessen your pudding-footed lubbardness."

"But if he offer fight?"

"He will not," Astolfo said. "Go ready yourself. We leave within the hour."

Yet when we set out again Astolfo had buckled on that sword he called Deliverer. This time he did not bedeck himself in the cut and colors of a spice merchant, all green and gold, but wore his ordinary habit of russet doublet and trunks, and soft boots whose floppy tops concealed ingenious pockets. He carried now a rolled case of pliable leather, the sort used to transport largish maps.

We walked at leisurely pace into this seedy square of town with its sleepy shops of tailors and shoemakers, tinkers and tapsters. When we knocked at the street door of Maxinnio's establishment, it was opened again by the young girl who had attended us before. This time, at Astolfo's suggestion, I observed her more closely, but she was only as I remembered: a thin little thing of medium stature, with the jet hair and the great dark eyes that shone like wet obsidian. Of her figure in the dingy, gray scullery smock I could tell little.

When she led us into the rehearsal salon, the scene was as before, with the severe ballet mistress yapping crossly at her charges, the bored lutenist fingering along in rote fashion, and the lanky Maxinnio on his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leather campaign stool, rapping the floor rhythmically with a short silver-headed cane.

He did not weep with joy at our appearance. "Here are you again, Astolfo," he snapped. "It seems you feel bound by some compulsion I cannot fathom to honor me with your presence and with the company of your overgrown henchmen."

"I bid you good morrow," Astolfo said in his mild voice.

"Have you auctioned off all your store of spices? I see you fitted today in a more customary livery."

"Today I come in my own interest and not in that of the merchant."

"That merchant who did not exist in the first place."

"That is true," Astolfo said. "But you must not complain of being deceived. You did not credit my tale from the beginning. I had not really thought to deceive someone so perspicacious as Maxinnio."

"Now I sniff arrant trickery," he replied. "I warn you that if I grow impatient with your pitiable ruses, I shall have my troupe of young girls pitch you through the window onto the cobblestones. They will likewise defenestrate these two footpads that hang to you like baubles on earlobes."

"Cry you mercy," said Astolfo. "The day is too shiny new; a shame if violence should mar it. I came only to acquaint you with some intelligence that may not yet be in your possession."

"You came to monger gossip? I think you will not expect to be paid for this intelligence, as you call it."

"Only look upon these drawings I have brought. I am curious to know your judgment of these works." He untied the laces of the leather case and began to unroll it.

"The only artworks in which I am now interested are the designs for my new ballet," Maxinnio said. "The preparatory sketches are useless and we must begin them anew."

"But only glance at this bit of handiwork." Astolfo unrolled a drawing on fine-wove paper and held it up before the dance master.

When Maxinnio blinked his eyes wide and gave a start that shook his whole body, I edged around to see what image must produce such reaction. I judged it would be in our interest for me to give but a lackadaisical, cool look at the drawing, but when I saw the figure there I too was surprised and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

intook my breath audibly. Maxinnio did not notice, staring fixedly, oblivious to all else.

Here was the dancer without a shadow, the girl I had spied through the cracked door on the floor above. This was her face uplifted, her figure weightless and elongated, her arms raised above her flowing hair, her slender hands thrusting into the light of day. My late exercises in art, clumsy as they had been, gave me to appreciate, to savor, the achievement that lay on the sheet Astolfo upheld.

When Maxinnio turned his eyes from the drawing to the shadow master, his face was full of rage, every feature contorted. He looked for all the world like one of those small statues of demons that are set out to fend away evil spirits from temple gardens. When he spoke, his voice was low, choking with fury. "I would have your life for this."

"My henchmen, as you name them, will answer for my safety," Astolfo said. "Anyway, why do you threaten? I have brought this exquisite picture as a gift for you."

"This dancer is my secret. She is the guarantee of my success with the new entertainment. I do not understand how you come by her likeness. She has not been seen abroad. I keep her close. No one is to see her until the ballet of The Sylphs of Light is presented in the new season."

"She will not appear in your dance of sylphs. She will never dance in public."

"She must. All is settled and cast as in stone."

"You have rescued from a meager and grudging life many a young girl," Astolfo said. "You have made the pliable ones into dancers and found employment for some of the others. But your interest in them reaches only so far as the boundary of your professional purposes. You know little of where they come from or who they are or may have been."

"I maintain neither orphanage nor almshouse," Maxinnio said. "The girls learn to be not persons but only dancers. They learn to live solely for dance, as I do live."

"And that is why you do not know even the true name of this girl. That is how you could with impunity strip her of her shadow, sell it away so she could not retrieve it, and present her onstage in perfect purity."

"I could easily rid them all of their shadows. But only this one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

embodies the ideal I search for. It is not shadow-lack that composes her perfection."

"But I have found that she is the natural daughter of a great and powerful noble who does not care to have her prance before the garlicky, mutton-gorging rabble. You are to hand her over to me to deliver to him and thus spare your own life and the lives of those in your employ, saving too the razement of this place to smoking embers."

"Who is this giant terror you threaten me with?"

"You shall not know that."

"How do I know that he exists?"

"Because I tell you so and have the picture of her.... Here, look you upon this other likeness. What do you observe?" Astolfo rolled up the drawing of the dancer and gave it to Mutano who secured it with a black satin ribbon. Then he unfurled another drawing and held it up as before.

Maxinnio gave this new image a puzzled glance, then leaned forward in his little chair and peered closely. "I think I know this shadow," he said, "but I cannot say how."

"It is the shadow of your silver dancer, the shade you bartered away."

He shook his head. "No. Her shadow is a thing of unparalleled grace. There is something askew about the drawing of this one. It is impaired. It looks as if some wasting disease has befallen it, some distemper that wracks its shape."

"That is the condition it has acquired since it left your hands. This drawing depicts how it now looks at this moment and I shall deliver it to the girl's father. From this picture of her shadow he will draw conclusions about how she is being treated here. When his anger is at its flaming peak, I shall tell him your name and show him where to seek you out."

"You would play me false and destroy me and my work...for what purpose? There has been no enmity between us. I hold you in perfect indifference. If you go to ruin me, it will be only in order to fatten your purse."

"The father will reward me when his daughter is restored to him. There may be payment also for you."

"I care not." Maxinnio clenched and unclenched his hand, rapped the floor with his ebony cane. "Heap your coin till it drown you. My concern is with my Sylphs of Light. If I could spare my silver dancer, she should go

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to her father on wings of wind. But the entertainment cannot afford her absence."

Astolfo gave the picture of the shadow to Mutano who rolled it up and secured it with a red ribbon. "And now, if you will examine this third rendering." He unscrolled before Maxinnio a last drawing, a likeness of another young dancer. The pose was the same as in the picture of the silver girl, but this girl had black hair instead of blonde and the eyes that gazed sunward were of shining onyx. Though not so tall as the other girl, she was equally graceful, a creature of calm and guileless movement, with the ease of brook water.

Maxinnio looked at it with grave care. "This is an interesting fantasy of what a dancer might aspire to. No one but Petrinius could have drawn it so, but it is not a study from life. If 'twere, I would find the girl and put her to use."

"The drawing is not taken from life, but the girl is real enough. You may be acquainted with her. She is called Leneela."

"I think not," Maxinnio said. "The one Leneela I know is but a little servant girl is our household. She has been sweeping stones and scrubbing floors and pots for three years now since her mother died."

"This is she."

"If it be she, how could I not recognize her in this guise?"

"She is so customary to your eyes that she became invisible."

"She is no dancer, only a scullery maid."

"She can be trained."

"In time, perhaps, if she have ability. But time is short."

"You speak as if you had choice in the matter. The father will claim his silvery daughter. I have but offered you another to take her place. There is no cost to you except a delay in presenting your Sylphs. You can bargain a deferment."

"That will not be simple and will incur further expense."

"Expenses will be compensated. Again, I tell you that you have no choice. A carriage will call for the girl at first twilight. You will ascertain that she is in the best of condition and will hand her into the carriage yourself. To join a child with its parent — that is a handsome thing to do."

"Handsome or foul-featured, it shall be done. Yet I will not forget this tiresome japery you have turned upon me."

"I have secured your life," Astolfo said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

It was early evening before the three of us came together again, sitting at a table laid out in the kitchen, dividing an enormous beef and kidney pie Astolfo had besought from the cooks. A cask of aged cider stood ready to ease down the meat. The shadow master had traveled earlier in the day to the chateau of Rutilius and arranged how the girl was to come into his household.

"I hope this will prove a fortunate event for the lass," I said. "'Tis a sorrow, her loss to the art of the dance."

He nodded gaily and said he was obliged to me for a happy thought.

"How so?"

"I have told Ser Rutilius that I believe her to be his natural daughter and pointed out several similarities of feature and physique. You suggested some such thing. We may well have preserved the both of them from destruction."

"Destruction?"

"One who falls in love with a shadow loves an image of the ideal. No woman can approach to the perfection of such a fond delusion. When disappointment and disillusion set in, a rank distaste for the fleshly person follows, for she will be seen as a betrayer of the ideal, a spoiler of the perfection that once gloriously existed. In a passionate man, revenge will come to seem a necessity. The blade, the noose, the poison goblet stand forth in the mind, palpable and inescapable. There is none so desperate, none so dangerous, as one whose ideals have crumbled."

"It is well to deceive him then, in the matter of blood ties," I said.

"If indeed we have deceived. It is yet plausible that she is his own."

"Will he not go now to seek the mother and verify your story?"

"Alas!" Astolfo cried. "In my vivid account, the mother was strangled by a jealous lover and thrown into the harbor. The sea laves her sorrowful bones ceaselessly."

"And this lover? Shall not Ser Rutilius look for his track?"

"Alack! He has repented himself and lives in exile in the Fog Islands, leading a solitary, miserable existence lamenting the excesses of his former life."

"A pretty fable. But there are yet matters I do not comprehend. How was it possible for Petrinius to make the three drawings? He had seen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

neither of the girls and he had no way to observe how the shadow had deteriorated."

"I knew that he would have made a copy for his own collection of the drawing he made for Rutilius. I asked him to make another, only altering it as if the shadow had started to deteriorate."

"And the girls? I do not comprehend how he could have seen either of them without his presence at Maxinnio's establishment being remarked."

"Petrinius did not see either girl."

"How then did he make their likenesses?"

"He made none." Astolfo swallowed heartily from his mug of cider, set it down, and wiped his mouth with his wrist. "But there are others in this land who can draw besides that vain and impertinent artist. In fact, I have been known to dash off a sketch now and then, sometimes in the manner of Manoni, or the Anonymous Citadel Master, or even in the style of Petrinius himself."

"You produced those fine drawings? But you did not see the silver dancer. You were in the salon below, distracting Maxinnio from my prying."

"I made attentive note of your description of her," he said. "And then, of course, there was Petrinius's rendering of her shadow. Look you, Falco, if a person may cast a shadow, why may not a shadow cast a person?"

"A shadow may cast — "

" — Can cast the *image* of a girl, at least. Think upon your own lustful and lurid fancies. Do they not result in some kind of physical manifestation? But please do not tell us of it. I am a modest man and easily embarrassed."

Have you ever wondered how a mute person laughs? In Mutano's case, laughter takes the form of a gruesomely huge grin, a thunderous pounding of tabletop and thighs, and plenteous tears streaming from the corners of the eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Go Ask Malice: A Slayer's Diary, by Robert Joseph Levy, Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2006, $9.99.

Queen of the Slayer, by Nancy Holder, Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2006, $9.99.

ASK ANY *Star Trek* fan: a TV series doesn't necessarily disappear once it goes off the air. And I don't just mean that it lives on in syndication or DVD collections. When a show has enough of a fan base, a whole industry can grow up around the original material, providing an endless array of new product, even if the show itself hasn't aired a fresh episode in years. Sometimes there are feature films. There can be comic books, action figures, calendars, lunch boxes, video and board games — you name it.

And books.

Lots and lots of books.

Although the final episode of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran a few years ago, the characters have appeared in variations of all of the above except for new feature films. I enjoyed the show a great deal, but I haven't kept up with the peripheral matter beyond noting its existence in various ads. Still, every once in a while I get a jones for something new in the Slayer universe, rather than rewatching an episode on DVD, so I'll pick up one of the books.

I was glad I did with *Go Ask Malice: A Slayer's Diary*. Robert Joseph Levy takes us back to the character Faith's early life — her troubled teenage years, how she began as a Slayer, what sent her to Sunnydale where we finally meet her in the TV series.

Levy tells the story in Faith's voice, in diary form, and does a good job of catching some of her speech quirks while fleshing out the reasons that she became the "bad girl" Slayer of the show. It's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

always smart to take something away from the "known history" of a show. Yes, the character has to end up who she was when we meet her on the show, but there's an opportunity here to show growth in her character arc that isn't available when you're writing stories using the major characters in situations that take place during the known history, or that follow up from where they were left at the end of the show.

Levy does a great job here. I felt I was reading a real book, not a novelization.

Not that there's anything wrong with novelizations, or books that feel like them. I just don't personally enjoy them. And I didn't much enjoy *Queen of the Slayers*, the latest *Buffy* tie-in novel by Nancy Holder. There were three main reasons for this:

No character growth. The cast all stayed the same from start to finish, and let me tell you, they were put through some trying times.

Related to that was my second annoyance. Nancy Holder does a good job of capturing the characters' voices in prose, but I often found their joking and quips inappropriate to the situation they were in. This kind of thing works on screen, because the actors can convey the seriousness of what's going on around them with their facial expressions and body language while they make jokes to alleviate the tension. On the written page? Not so much.

And lastly, this was far too busy a book. It starts up when the school bus is leaving the great big crater that was once Sunnydale (I figure at this point, it's no longer a spoiler to say something like that), and goes on to show us that closing the Hellmouth there actually made things worse, rather than averting the apocalypse.

Holder spends on-stage time with pretty much the entire cast of the series (even bringing in long-gone characters such as the werewolf Oz and the ghost of Tara, and she ties the events of her story in with the end of the *Angel* TV series) while also introducing us to a whole slew of villains, other Slayers, and members of the Watcher's Council. The constant shifting of viewpoint means you never really get into the skin of any character — but it doesn't matter, because as I said above, they stay the same from start to finish.

Queen of the Slayers is an ambitious book — too ambitious, in my opinion. It's a *big* story — big

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

enough for a couple of seasons of TV episodes — and feels crammed into these pages.

I don't really blame Holder for this. I've read other books by her that I've liked, and I think she was trying to give the fans of the show (and of the *Angel* series) a big-bang sense of closure. Unfortunately, she was constrained by the limitations of her page count, and the final result is a hectic hodgepodge.

This would have worked much better as a series of novels, each focusing on various characters, that would eventually tell a larger story. And it would have been even better if she'd been allowed to show the changes in the characters that events of this magnitude would have wrought.

Pride of Baghdad, by Brian K. Vaughan & Nico Henrichon, Vertigo, 2006, $19.99.

Here's a story that would have done Kipling proud. Brian K. Vaughan has taken a news item about four lions escaping from a Baghdad zoo in 2003 during the bombing of Iraq and turned it into a meditation on war, freedom, and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. (Though "interpersonal" is perhaps the wrong term since the characters are all — or at least, mostly — animals.)

Vaughan anthropomorphizes his characters to some extent, but while they speak and express individual worldviews and values, they remain very much the animals that they are.

One of the lions is already planning an escape when the zoo is bombed and all the animals are freed — at least those that survived the bombing. The lions don't understand the war-torn countryside they travel through as they look for a new home — because all most of them knew is the zoo — but their journey creates a window into the horrors of the situation that the rest of us can certainly understand.

I'm not going to tell you too much about the plot for the usual reasons — why should I spoil the experience for you? — but I will say that Niko Henrichon does a fabulous job with his art.

There are good artists who can do wonderful individual panels, but they can't create a narrative flow. Then there are artists who aren't as skilled, but are terrific storytellers. Henrichon is one of those rare finds who does both extremely well. He puts so much expression into the faces of the various animals, without resorting to "cartooning," and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his panel-to-panel art has a wonderful, cinematic flow.

I wasn't familiar with his art before this book, but I'd like to see more. I wonder what his take on *The Jungle Book* would be like. Certainly not Disney-pretty.

As for Vaughan, every project he undertakes is a treat. My favorite is the ongoing series *Y: The Last Man* (also from Vertigo) which he does in collaboration with artist Pia Guerra (whose work I love). Though the series has been going for a while you can easily catch up with the story in trade paperback collections.

A Soul in a Bottle, by Tim Powers, Subterranean Press, 2006, $22.

I don't know how familiar this is for you:

You have a stack of books you haven't read yet, many of which you're really looking forward to starting. And still, every time you're in a book shop — if you're feeling at all flush — you'll pick up one or two more and add them to the stack. So far, so good. The problem comes that whenever you pick one up — a first novel, one by a favorite author, whatever — none of them appeals to you.

In fact, you realize that you haven't really been reading much of anything lately because too many books make you feel like you're just going through the motions. You've always been a reader, so you read, but they're all so easy to put down and there's no burning desire to pick it up again — even when they're not particularly bad.

You don't even wonder why the shine has gone off something that brought you so much pleasure. You just find yourself doing other things instead.

Until *the* book shows up.

Maybe you can't relate to the scenario above, but it will at least give you my frame of mind when, late one night, I found myself picking up this slim volume by Tim Powers.

I just meant to have a look at it — it was too late to start a book. So I admired the illustrations — photo-collages by the inimitable J. K. Potter — then read the first couple of pages.

And I kept reading until I was done. It was a *very* late night for me.

Now, Powers always a delivers a fine story — but they usually come with dense, convoluted plots, and huge helpings of quirkiness that often become really strange. That's not the case here. *A Soul in a Bottle* is a sweet, almost understated story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's mysterious, certainly, from the moment its middle-aged protagonist has his first chance encounter with a young woman on the pavement in front of Hollywood's Chinese Theatre, to its bittersweet end.

There isn't a great deal of character introspection, but you *know* these characters from the first moment they step on stage. And when the Lady or the Tiger moment comes, Powers doesn't reveal the character's choice, only that he makes one. He pulls it off without giving anything away, but doesn't leave us frustrated either, because he ties it all up in the last few pages.

Powers is responsible for many of my favorite novels and stories, but I particularly loved this book. Not least because it reminded me why I love reading—more, that I *do* love reading. I haven't lost that joy; I'm just not finding enough books that do it for me.

But here was a book that utterly absorbed me. I wasn't distracted by showy writing (though the prose, in retrospect, is lovely) or the author parading his cleverness. Instead, I was given a lovely tale that wasn't afraid to tell a small, simple story with freshness and a great deal of heart.

The only problem now is, what do I read next? (Check back next month to see.)

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

VISIT OUR WEB SITE

SUBSCRIBE

CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS

COLUMNS

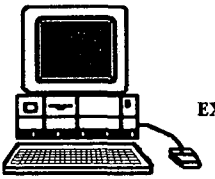
EDITORIALS

DISCUSSION BOARD

WRITERS' GUIDELINES

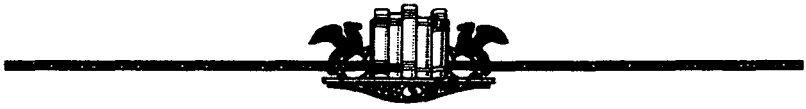
EXTENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANTHOLOGIES



www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Road, by Cormac McCarthy, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, $24.

Salon Fantastique: Fifteen Original Tales of Fantasy, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006, $16.95.

In Other Words, by John Crowley, Subterranean Press, 2007, $35.

POST-APOCALYPSE NOW

IF YOU READ one grim, soul-sucking novel this holiday season, make it *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's unrelentingly bleak vision of a post-holocaust world where the question of human existence seems to be summed up in the question "How many doomed souls can writhe on the end of a pin?" Answer: Two — until the last few pages, when the answer becomes One.

The bare bones plot of *The Road* really is bare bones. A nameless man and his nameless son, so emaciated they resemble concentration camp victims, stumble across a nameless landscape scoured utterly by a nameless environmental cataclysm. Their aim is to live long enough to reach an unnamed coast before winter arrives.

> With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasnt sure. He hadnt kept a diary for years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here.

The countryside McCarthy evokes (presumably somewhere in the Appalachians, the author's home ground) has been so blasted by a nuclear winter that the coast is never held out as a blue vision of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hope; more like one of the still-burning outer suburbs of Hell, rather than the charred cold ruins of its downtown. Almost nothing has survived the global disaster; no animals, no plants, no aquatic life. Nothing moves in the sky save ash and black snow. The only living vegetation is a handful of morels the man discovers in a scorched wood.

Still, like cockroaches, a few members of humankind have survived, if you consider cannibals and the near-dead to be human; I personally would rather spend my Last Days with the cockroaches. The nature of the causal event in the years-long chain of catastrophe is never made specific, but nonetheless seems clear, familiar from countless doomsday scenarios in genre novels and movies —

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the powerswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass.

The man survives. His pregnant wife lives long enough to give birth to their son, but before the novel begins she has killed herself. The man and his child walk the road of the book's title, a highway to Hell if ever there was one, and scavenge what they can find in abandoned houses and stores and vehicles. Canned vegetables and fruit and moldering grain are their staples, along with brackish water. A backyard bunker, miraculously undespoiled by looters, is the closest the novel comes to a depiction of paradise on Earth: man and boy enter it and view its wonders with the same transcendent joy and disbelief that Schliemann felt upon discovering the ruins of Troy.

Mostly, though, *The Road* is a Cook's Tour of Gehenna. In McCarthy's hands, Hell is not necessarily other people — the boy is luminous with grace, the man a loving, literally self-sacrificing father. Instead, Hell is what mankind has made of the Earth, without any divine or demonic intervention. There are scenes of graphic, appalling cruelty — shackled men and women being kept alive for food, among them a man, also still alive, whose legs have been neatly stripped of flesh; an infant skewered over a firepit. The novel's protagonists share the road with few other travelers, which is a good thing — most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are cannibals who travel in packs, armed with weapons forged from scrap metal, and accompanied by captive women and catamites, as well as prisoners who pull carts full of even less fortunate captives who will end up as food. The old Soylent Green formula has been reduced to its most basic elements. The boy's father calls these folks "the bad guys," a designation few readers will disagree with. The boy constantly seeks reassurance that the two of them are "the good guys," and seeing as there's no one else around, the answer to that seems pretty clear, too.

The Road is written in McCarthy's customary stripped-down prose, complete with eccentric punctuation. It's a style matched perfectly to the skeletal world he describes, beautiful, often heartbreaking, with a chill detachment reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, although there is barely a trace of humor, mordant or otherwise, in *The Road*. The tale's deceptive simplicity lends itself to multiple interpretations. *The Road* can be read as a straightforward account of what it would be like to die, slowly and painfully, of starvation, as well as a warning of our own imminent destruction, helped along by global warming and nuclear catastrophe. It can be taken as a fable of how culture arises from the wreckage of a civilization, not as a green sprig but a wrinkled gray fungus that, despite its unappetizing appearance, can both survive and sustain life.

And it can be read as a tale with Biblical resonance — the golden child, the suffering father, the mother whose sole purpose is to give birth then disappear. When the boy and his father meet a person with whom they actually have a real conversation, a genuine human encounter, it is in the guise of a man named Ely, whose resemblance to the prophet Elijah does not go unremarked. The novel's odd, elevated diction gives the scene a weight that is at once mystical and a wee bit pretentious. It also lends itself rather easily to parody. There are echoes here of all sorts of unhappy males walking in lockstep to their doom, from George and Lenny to Ratso Rizzo and Joe Buck, and especially Vladimir and Estragon in "Waiting for Godot."

> The boy lay with his head in the man's lap. After a while he said: They're going to kill those people, arent they?
>
> Yes.
>
> Why do they have to do that?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I dont know.

Are they going to eat them?

I dont know.

They're going to eat them, arent they?

Yes.

And we couldnt help them because then theyd eat us too.

Yes.

And thats why we couldnt help them.

Yes.

Okay.

This suggests a dire coda to Beckett's famous lines: "I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on before somebody eats me."

The Road has become a bestseller, and it deserves to be read. It's a chillingly beautiful book, though its tropes will be familiar, perhaps overly so, to genre readers, or anyone who's read *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Damnation Alley*, *The Stand*, *Engine Summer*, "A Boy and His Dog," and especially *Riddley Walker*. The stylistic austerity of *The Road* makes one visualize it in black and white: it's a cautionary tale set in a world where Sauron has won: Earth has become Mordor, the orcs have slaughtered almost everyone. Oh, and Sam Gamgee dies.

Science fiction has a long history of illustrating not just the wild variety of ways in which humanity can blow itself up, but also the colorful, if sometimes unsavory, means by which we might survive afterwards. *The Road* doesn't offer much middle ground between utopia and gnawed human bones in a cold campfire. Granted, neither would a nuclear winter, but McCarthy's endless, ghoulishly inventive examples of barbarism might be more effective if there were some suggestion that civility might have survived too. As it stands, the novel's two protagonists carry the book's entire symbolic weight: the father is saintly, the boy angelic. They really are the good guys.

This is where I think the novel becomes problematical. With its nearly unrelieved vision of debased, barbaric humanity, *The Road* resembles a secular humanist version of a Hell House, those Christian fundamentalist sideshows which purport to illustrate the horrific consequences of sin. McCarthy is preaching to the choir here — it's hard to imagine too many Wal-Mart Christians among his readers, though maybe I'm wrong — but at the same time he's telling the choir they're damned, too. The sins on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

display in *The Road*, the sins implied, at any rate, are nuclear proliferation, global warming, overpopulation, human warfare, a gross refusal of our responsibilities toward our planet and all our fellow creatures. The punishment is meeting the enemy and seeing not Us, but the next stage in our evolution —

> My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word.

The Road is full of references to fire — not just nuclear holocaust and the fire next time but Promethean fire, the flame of human knowledge, the small warm ember of civilization that the first protohumans carried as they migrated from Africa and which, McCarthy suggests, we may all too soon be reduced to guarding ourselves. "You have to carry the fire," the man tells his son. At *The Road*'s end, that fire barely flickers, or seems to flicker, the faintest gleam in a world where not even starlight penetrates the abyss.

Salon Fantastique, the latest anthology edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, is what we've come to expect from the reigning arbiters of literary fantasy in the short form, a reliable collation of tales by mostly established writers, with a few newer names to season the mix. Despite its title, and a brief editorial introduction that refers to literary salons and salonniéres from Charles Perrault to the Beats, the stories in *Salon Fantastique* share no narrative provenance, though an air of general, mostly gentle, melancholy pervades nearly all of them. No robust sword and sorcery here, nor much in the way of unalloyed joy, either.

The stories are a mixed bag in quality and subject. Richard Bowes's "Dust Devil on a Quiet Street" is one of the best, an acidic, sharp-eyed take on H. R. Wakefield's classic "He Cometh and He Passeth By!" set in Greenwich Village. It features a marvelous cast of aging beatniks, onetime Warhol acolytes, and nouveau hipsters, whose web of shifting social and creative allegiances is woven and periodically torn apart depending on which It Girl or Boy has possession of a talismanic ring. This sly cautionary tale should become required reading for any struggling artist or writer. It certainly confirmed my worst suspicions regarding art installations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gregory Maguire's "Nottamun Town" is another standout. It takes a well-worn narrative device — the interweaving of folk song, memory, and actual event — and creates an achingly sad tapestry of longing, with a surprise ending that brought tears to my eyes. Jedediah Berry's lovely, understated "To Measure the Earth" makes the most of its stark, eerie Hudson Valley setting to tell a love story that, despite its supernatural underpinnings, might have been drawn from the archives of the local historical society. Catherynne M. Valente likewise puts a creepy spin on the well-worn trope of the seal-wife, in "A Gray and Soundless Tide." Paul Di Filippo's wonderful "Femaville 29" also evokes classic tales, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" and Ray Bradbury's "A Miracle of Rare Device," in the unlikely wasteland of a FEMA emergency housing site. Lucius Shepard channels the voice of a Caribbean storyteller in "The Lepidopterist," the one genuinely chilling tale in the collection, a story with an unsettling resonance that kicks in only in its final sentences. Jeffrey Ford's "The Night Whiskey" is also framed as a tall tale, a dreamy account of an annual village ritual that inevitably evokes "The Lottery," without sacrificing Ford's own distinctive voice and take on the proceedings.

The other writers all contribute mostly fine work, but I must make special mention of David Prill, a new name to me, whose "The Mask of '67" is an absolute gem. A surreal, deadpan story of a former high school queen turned movie star, whose small-town homecoming grows increasingly bizarre and marvelously, unexpectedly touching, "The Mask of '67" is one of the most memorable stories I've read in years. It alone is worth the price of admission to this collection. Happily, the other tales found therein make *Salon Fantastique* well worth a visit.

In Other Words collects essays, occasional pieces, and book reviews by John Crowley, in a wide-ranging compendium that touches on writers as varied (or similar, depending on one's worldview) as Vladimir Nabokov and Pauline Réage, Robert Louis Stevenson and Anthony Burgess, Ioan Culianu and The Amazing Randi. The standout is Crowley's essay on the Romanian scholar Culianu, a modern-day mage if ever there was one, and the tragic and unsettling circumstances surrounding both his life and death; a piece that illuminates not just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Culianu (whom Crowley knew) but also Crowley's own fiction, especially the *Ægypt* sequence. Nearly as good are pieces on various comic artists, including Winsor McCay and Edward Gorey, and especially a lovely appreciation of Walt Kelly, creator of *Pogo*. A number of these essays first appeared in the *Washington Post Book World*, although there was no bibliographical information in the galley under review; an omission I hope will be rectified before publication. Otherwise, this is an indispensable volume by one of our greatest writers.

NOTICE FOR SUBSCRIBERS

In October of 2006, a firm called Magazine Payment Services sent a mailing to our subscribers. The mailing was a subscription solicitation, but it looked deceptively like a renewal notice. It was not authorized by us, the rates quoted were not our usual rates, and it appears that they mailed this solicitation to our entire subscription list (including people with lifetime subscriptions, who we thank for notifying us promptly).

This firm is not connected with our magazine and as we go to press with this issue, we have no evidence that payments sent to them will be forwarded to us.

If you sent a payment to them, please check with us to see if we have received it. (We can be reached via our Website or write us at PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.) The company that sent these solicitations is Magazine Payment Services, PO Box 1296, Sausalito, CA 94966. Their listed phone number is (866) 221-8585 but we have not been able to reach them through this number.

For future reference, please remember that subscriptions can always be sent to us directly. If you choose to use a subscription agency, there are many reliable ones such as EBSCO and QSP with whom we have done business for years. But unfortunately rogue agencies seem to be proliferating. If you encounter an agency that leaves you with any doubts, check them out first with the Better Business Bureau.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Magic takes many forms. In recent years, we've seen "White Magic," "Black Magic for Dummies," and "Magic for Beginners." Now Mr. Reed contributes his own tale of supernatural arts with this inquiry into some of the shadowy recesses of human sexuality. Despite the title of this tale, parents might want to vet this one before sharing it with youngsters.

Magic with Thirteen-Year-Old Boys

By Robert Reed

THEY DO LOVE TO TALK. There always has to be conversation before, and afterward, unless they're deeply drunk, words are pretty much mandatory. Nothing makes women happier than hours of empty, soul-baring chatter. There's even a few of them that need to talk while they're doing it. Of course their words get awfully simple, if it's during. They grunt out commands and sometimes encouragement, and a few favorite phrases are repeated with predictable rhythm. But if a man can hold his cadence, and if he knows what she likes, it isn't boring. Simple and busy and very crude noise wrapped around a fair amount of pleasure, or maybe a huge amount of pleasure. Then it's finished, preferably for him and for her both, and everyone gets a few moments of silence marked with wet breathing and spiritual insights.

"Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you awake?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, I'm not."

"No?"

"Hey — !"

"Are you awake now, Ted?"

"That fingernail — !"

Without a trace of sorrow in her voice, she says, "Sorry." Then after a deep sigh, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"Liar."

"Okay. You caught me."

"So what's on your mind?"

"You."

"Good answer."

Good enough to earn a few moments of uninterrupted quiet.

"Ted?"

"Who?"

She ignores his response. "I have a question," she announces. "I've been meaning to ask this since, I don't know when. A couple weeks, at least...."

"What's the question?"

"Do you believe?"

"In what?"

"Anything at all," she says.

He says, "Gravity," and laughs for a moment. "I wholeheartedly believe in the abiding force of gravity."

"That's not what I mean," she warns. "I'm talking about faith. In God and that sort of stuff."

"Stuff?"

"You know what I mean."

"Stuff."

"Do you accept things you can't see? Forces and powers that exist outside the realm of pure reason?"

"Gravity," he repeats.

"Don't joke, Ted."

"I mean that." He sounds sincere and perhaps a little angry. "Most of human history has been lived happily without the concept of gravity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

People never imagined that bodies in space attract each other. Even with Newton's equations...they work only in limited situations. And the deepest parts of Einstein's work still don't address every condition in our universe, much less in those other realms that may or may not exist."

A hand waves in the darkness. "Fine. Gravity."

"Here's something else to consider," he says. "We can't tell for certain that every mass in the universe attracts every other mass. It's impossible to do the necessary research. I mean, yes, the Earth pulls down on us. And two metal balls suspended on delicate wires will attract one another in the proper way. But what about two naked people sprawled out on sweaty sheets? That work has never been done in the laboratory. Who knows if the law of nature holds in our circumstances?" He laughs again, briefly. "So really, you can see, this business about gravity is one enormous leap of faith."

She says, "Sorry."

"Apology accepted."

A pause. "Anything else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there anything else you have faith in?"

"Oh, sure."

"Are you going to say, 'Evolution'?"

"Hardly," he says. "Natural selection has been proven more thoroughly and far more convincingly than gravity has ever been."

"Okay. What about magic in general?"

"What about it?"

"Do you believe in it?"

"In magic?"

"Do you understand the question?"

He sighs.

"You can't accept magic," she decides.

"Think not?"

"Judging by your tone — "

"You can't read my tone, and I'd bet anything you can't read my mind. Little Miss Believes-in-things-that-can't-be-seen."

"Sorry."

He takes a long moment, then asks, "What do you mean by 'magic'?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Anything and everything that's miraculous," she begins, with feeling. "Magic is everything that shouldn't happen. Magic can conjure up the most amazing things, and usually from nothing."

"'From nothing,'" he repeats.

"Magic has rituals and rules. And when it has real power, magic can harm the weak and the sloppy. But there always must be a few great wizards in our world, and with their spells, they achieve wonders. That's why magic exists. That's why it is something worth treasuring."

"Yes."

"What?"

"I said, 'Yes.'"

"You buy the idea of magic and spells?"

"Very much so."

"All right. What kinds of magic?"

After a moment, he says, "No."

"What?"

"I won't tell you."

"You will too."

"Why? You want to hear about my little run-in with the mystical world?"

"Of course."

"Okay then. I was thirteen."

She says nothing.

"Thirteen," he repeats.

"You were a boy. I heard you."

He takes a breath and then another breath before saying, "You don't know anything about being a thirteen-year-old boy. Understand?"

"Okay," she squeaks.

He takes one final deep breath. "I was with my best friends," he says, "and one day, seemingly by accident, we happened across a magical book."

They were playing in a woodlot behind their subdivision. Ted had seen a fox the night before — a beautiful graceful dream of an animal — and with the help of his two closest friends, he was searching for the fox's den. What the boys would do when they found it, he had no idea. But the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hunt managed to hold everybody's interest for nearly an hour, leaving the three of them hot and thirsty, and ready for some new adventure.

That's when Phillip found a backpack tucked under a juniper tree.

Scott didn't approve. "You should have left it there," was his opinion. "It doesn't belong to you, so put it back now."

Phillip was the brave one in their group. Scott believed in rules and obedience, while Ted was somewhere between. Exactly where he fit depended on the day and his mood.

"Don't you want to see what's inside?" Phillip asked. Then he shook the pack, something with heft bouncing inside.

"No," Scott said. "That isn't ours — "

"But maybe there's an ID," Ted mentioned. "We'll find the owner and give it back, and maybe even split the reward."

The rationale meant something to Scott. Sensing something fun, Phillip didn't want any owner to be found, but it served his needs to nod confidently, saying, "Yeah, let's look for a driver's license or something."

The pack was old, the gray-green nylon fabric thin as tissue in places, a couple tears mended with rusted safety pins. The object was dirty enough to show that it had been outside for a few days, but not as filthy as it would have been if it were exposed to last week's heavy rains. The back pocket had been left open, Phillip discovered. It was empty. The zipper to the main pocket fought his tugging, but he managed to pull it open far enough to look inside, turning the pack to where it could fill with sunshine.

Many years later, Ted would still remember his friend's face changing. The blue eyes just lit up, and a mouth that was usually held in a tight smirk fell open. Then a small, deeply impressed voice said, "Not here."

"What is it?" Scott asked.

Phillip clamped both hands over the open pack, sealing in the contents. "Back this way," he said. "In the gully."

Better than anyone else in the world, those three boys knew the local terrain. It took several minutes, but once they stopped running, they were out of sight of every human eye in Creation, squatting on a flat piece of the ravine floor, forming a triangle around this most unexpected treasure.

"Okay," Phillip said, releasing his hands.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What is it?" Scott inquired, leaning back warily.

"Take a look," Phillip said to Ted.

Whatever was inside, Ted guessed that it wasn't dangerous. At least it wouldn't bite or explode. So he reached in blindly, feeling a stack of thick paper bound together with fat rubber bands. Then just for fun, he faked pain, jumping back as if a set of fangs had stabbed his fingers.

"Oh, crap!" Scott blurted, tumbling onto his butt.

Ted laughed at his cowardly friend, and then he pulled out a stack of photographs. Suddenly every boy was staring at the top image. Even Phillip, who knew what to expect, was staring. Everybody took a small step back, and Ted dropped the discovery on the dusty ground. And all these years later, he could still see the contorted face of the young woman and an astonishing amount of her naked body and what the faceless man was obviously doing to her.

"Porn," she says.

He doesn't respond.

"I thought you were talking about magic," she complains. "Not just some dirty pictures."

"I told you," he says. "I was thirteen."

"Yeah, I remember."

"A new-born adolescent."

She decides not to speak.

"You won't understand," he says. "You can't. Even if I was to tell you the whole story — "

"I thought you just did."

"No. That's just the beginning. I was setting the scene. The important stuff comes later."

"Is that a pun?"

"Do you want to hear this, or not? Because I don't have to tell it."

"I'm listening," she promises. "Go on."

But he doesn't say one word. Not immediately. He seems to be debating the relative merits of what he has begun, and when he finally does speak, he does so slowly, cautiously, as if at any moment, given the tiniest excuse, he will stop talking and never again say one word about this intimate subject.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The boys quickly recovered from their shock. Phillip knelt and studied the top image. Then he wiped both hands against his sweaty shirt, and with the others close beside him, he touched the page. The photograph had been glued to a sheet of what looked like thin cardboard, stiff and pale gray, larger than the picture and cut to size with long scissors. Two fat red rubber bands held the book together. Phillip removed the top band and then its partner, taking the trouble to place both inside the empty pack. Then he paused and grinned, enjoying a quick deep breath before turning the page.

The next photograph was smaller, and it was black-and-white, and it was nearly as memorable as the first. A different girl was holding herself in a completely different position. What must have been a brilliant flash gave her body a silvery-white glow that was at least as captivating as what she was doing. The man seemed to be the same man, judging by the proportions of his body. But the bed was different, and the room around the bed too, and if it was the same camera as before, it was being used in a very different fashion.

The third page had four color Polaroid pictures set in a specific order, each equally faded by time. This time, there was no man. But again, the girl was fresh. She looked young and exceptionally tall, but like the first two women, she seemed to be wholly oblivious to a camera, busily doing things with herself that were as bizarre as they were captivating.

In all, there were thirty pages.

The boys counted the photographs and arrived at several general conclusions: Each page held a different girl, and when a man was visible, he was probably the same man, or at least a fellow with a similar body. But the girls were never the same. Not in age or build, and sometimes not even in their race. The only similarity was that each of them was young, and in some fashion, lovely.

About their lover, nothing seemed exceptional. Even boys of thirteen had enough experience in the world to feel sure about that. The man's legs were not lean or particularly muscular, nor was any dimension about his body anything but average. Whenever he was standing, his stomach looked pudgy. Perhaps he had handsome features, but there was no way to tell since his face was out of view. But the women's faces were always

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

visible; with each astonishing image, it was the face that the boys' eyes were drawn to first.

Among the three of them, Phillip had the most experience with pornography. His older brother had amassed a considerable library of *Playboy*s and *Penthouse*s and even a few *Hustler*s. And most important, Phillip had a practical smartness about things most thirteen-year-olds never even thought about.

"This doesn't make sense," he complained.

Scott was flipping back through the book now, slowly, page by delicious page. "What do you...?" His voice faded, hands adjusting the fit of his jeans. "What doesn't make sense?"

"Each one's different," Phillip said.

Ted was staring at the faces and breasts and other stretches of honest, captivating anatomy, committing details to a memory that would never again function at this very high level.

"He's got to be some kind of stud," Scott replied, aching with envy. "Whoever he is, the guy knows how to get girls."

"I don't mean the different girls," Phillip said. "I mean the cameras."

Confused, the other boys glanced at their friend.

"We can check again. But I don't think it's ever the same camera twice," Phillip continued. "Just like it's not the same girl. And does that make sense?"

Ted hadn't considered the matter, not even for half an instant.

"Thirty cameras. Who owns thirty cameras?" Phillip flipped back up the Polaroid page. "You're a stud, okay. And you like taking pictures. But who in the hell uses a new camera each time?"

"He's rich," Scott offered. "Which explains how he gets them, too."

Phillip shook his head. "Okay, he's loaded. But why would a rich dude bother with a freakin' Polaroid?"

Ted began to appreciate the problem, although he couldn't imagine that it meant much. What mattered were the photographs themselves. "Who do you think they belong to?" he asked, trying to steer the topic.

"And why put the book out here?" Phillip pressed. "This is an adult. He's got a house of his own, somewhere. Why stick this kind of thing in an old backpack and dump it in the middle of the woods?"

Ted had wondered about that problem, at least in passing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But in one critical issue, Scott was miles ahead of his friends. "I don't care how many cameras were used," he announced, "or why this was lost out here. This book belongs to us now. That's what matters." The cowardly, law-abiding boy had finally found something worth taking. Turning back to the first picture, he said, "What we need to do, right now ...we've got to figure out what we're doing with this wonderful gift."

He pauses again.

After a long silence, she says, "I bet they were different men, each with his own camera. That would explain things."

Watching her, he says nothing.

Then she nods, admitting, "But that's a smart thing to notice. Perceptive and all. Your friend, Phillip, must have been a pretty sharp kid. I don't know if I'd pick up on it, if I was looking at dirty pictures."

"You never have?" he asks.

"Not like guys look, no."

"Yeah, I guess not. Women don't like porn the same as men do."

"Tell me."

"We're wired differently," he says. "Visual stimulation is everything. Sometimes I think we're the same species only because we've got to interbreed. If not for that, men and women would just fly apart."

"That's a pretty harsh assessment."

"And honest," he says.

She shrugs, returning to her explanation. "This was back when? The early eighties, I'm guessing. Even before the Internet, there were plenty of twisted men collecting twisted smut. There were networks where they could sell it and trade for it. Some guy with an obsession probably just gathered up a stack of dirty pictures where the men looked kind of the same."

"That's one explanation."

"You have a better one?"

"A simpler, sharper explanation. Yes."

"And what's that?"

"Those cameras are different because each girl supplied the equipment. A variety of cameras and film, in a string of bedrooms and wherever."

"Then that was one incredibly smooth gentleman."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He says nothing.

"'Hey, honey. Pop a roll in your thirty-five-millimeter and set the timer. Let's make a memento of tonight.'"

"Doesn't sound reasonable to you?"

"Hardly," she says. "And I know a little something about taking pictures, too. If these shots were half as good as you keep saying...well, that means each woman took dozens, maybe hundreds of them. Because in my experience, even the best photographer needs luck when he's using timers or a cord tied to the switch — "

"Magic."

"What?"

"Do you remember? That's how we got on this subject, talking about spells and magic."

"Yeah, I remember — "

"'Conjuring up amazing things from nothing.' You said words like that, didn't you?"

"Pornography is magic. Is that what you're telling me?"

"With rituals and rules, and a real power. Plus the capacity to do enormous harm, if that power's left in the wrong hands."

"This is just stupid."

He says nothing.

"Stupid," she repeats. Then with a grudging curiosity, she asks, "So. Is there anything else to this dumb story?"

"You tell me: What else does magic involve?"

"Involve?"

"What haven't you seen so far?"

She hesitates. Then, warily, she says, "The wizard?"

And with that, he resumes his story.

TOGETHER, the boys found a fresh hiding place for their treasure. In another portion of the woods was a discarded slab of old pavement, invisible from most vantage points but offering a clear view of the surrounding terrain. An earlier generation of boys had dug a deep dry hole beneath the slab. Rain would never touch the pack. Brush and last year's leaves hid its presence. With the conviction of grown men, they drew up rules

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

concerning the book: You had to sit above the hole for five minutes, making sure nobody had followed you. The book and bag had to stay in that one place. Each picture was to be handled carefully. And when you were done, you needed to make sure you were alone before hiding everything inside the same hole.

For a week, that system worked well enough.

Ted visited the book four or five times. Phillip went with him on the first visit, and they discovered Scott already there, sitting on the edge of the slab, long legs dangling in the speckled light. The next day, Ted went alone — his longest, most memorable visit — investing at least an hour examining one image after the next. Then there was another day when he hoped to be alone, but Scott caught him on the trail. His friend was a big kid, clumsy and pale, smart at school and foolish everywhere else. "Have you already been there?" Scott asked, almost running to catch up.

"You know I was," Ted replied. "You saw me — "

"I mean today," the boy added.

It wasn't even noon. "No," Ted admitted. Then a premonition tickled him, and he asked, "How about you?"

"Once," he admitted.

"You mean today?"

"After breakfast," Scott said, his face coloring and eyes growing distant.

There was an addictive quality to those photographs. Even at thirteen, Ted found the effects both sickening and irresistible — a set of innate urges released by what was nothing more than chemical emulsions on sheets of fancy paper. He couldn't stop thinking about the girls and young women. Without trying, he would close his eyes and see not only their bodies but their faces, too, and in particular, their vivid eyes and pretty mouths that helped convey a set of expressions that were both remote and self-absorbed, and to him, endlessly fascinating.

All women, in all possible circumstances, suddenly held potentials that Ted had never noticed. Actresses were more beautiful than ever, even the famous old ones. And the neighborhood women — the average wives and mothers who before this were no more than little portions of a humdrum landscape — had become miraculous creatures. The boy found himself staring at them, asking himself what kinds of wondrous, unlikely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

things these ordinary ladies did with their husbands. And worst of all were the teenage girls. A week earlier, Ted could have made inane conversation with most of them, feeling only a pleasant nervousness. But now the stakes were infinitely greater. He had trouble making eye contact, much less offering any coherent noise; and his worst enemy was his own infected brain, constantly inventing ways to think about matters delicious and wrong.

Phillip seemed less infected than Ted. Maybe his earlier exposure to dirty magazines acted like a vaccination, or perhaps it was just his natural man-of-the-world attitude. Whatever the reason, Phillip didn't feel compelled to visit the backpack every day, and when he pulled out the pictures, he noticed nonsexual details missed by his best friends.

"This is the oldest photograph," he told them.

The image was black-and-white, but that didn't mean anything. Plenty of the pictures were black-and-white. Ted took hold of the photo and lifted it up to the light. The quality was obvious. Family portraits had the same perfect flash and glossy finish. "But why's this the oldest?"

"Look here." A crooked finger jabbed at the edge of the photograph. "See the calendar?"

In the background, something was hanging on the white wall.

"You look at it." His friend produced a magnifying glass, pressing it into Ted's hand. "Try and read the month and year."

May 1938.

"Let me see," Scott said. But instead of reading the date, he used the glass to study the fine details of the woman's body.

"So there's an old calendar on the wall," Ted responded.

"What about these hair styles?" Phillip flipped between examples. "This one looks like it's from the forties, and this has to be today, and this one back here...it sure looks like what's-her-name's hair. From the beach movies."

He meant Sandra Dee or Gidget. One of those girl-next-door girls.

"There's thirty years of pictures here," Phillip said.

The idea was unsettling, sure. But Ted pretended not to care. "The guy has been busy," he argued. "That's all that means."

Flipping back to the oldest photograph, Phillip pointed out, "This belly here...it doesn't look like a twenty-year-old belly."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's a different guy," Ted offered. "An earlier pervert."

"Except it isn't." Phillip had invested a great deal of time to the study, measuring the male's legs and belly, and everything else that was visible. Pointing to a kidney-shaped blotch riding on one pasty white leg, he then flipped to another black-and-white shot. "This is probably the newest photograph," he continued. "See? The same exact mark. And the body looks exactly the same as before."

Ted didn't like looking at the man's bare leg.

Scott claimed the new photograph, and again, he used the magnifying glass on the woman.

Without question, Scott was sicker than his buddies. Three or four times every day, he devised some excuse to slip out of his house and down to the woods for just one more look. He had admitted that he couldn't sleep through the night anymore, and that he was rubbing himself raw. There were moments when the kid seemed to be willing himself to dive inside one of those inviting, addictive images.

"Look at this," said Scott. "Look at her close."

He set the new picture and magnifying glass into Ted's hands.

As it happened, this was Ted's favorite image. The clear, colorless photograph showed what the man was doing, and judging by the woman's arching back, she was enjoying herself. Enthralled, she had twisted her head around as far as possible, looking up at the camera, her long straight hair plunging away from her face, leaving her features more than half visible — a woman filled with a mixture of determined concentration and utter bliss.

Ted's breathing quickened whenever he saw her.

"Look close," Scott repeated.

With the glass, Ted started to count the neat knobby bumps that defined that wondrous spine.

"No, her face. That's what you need to see."

But he already had. A hundred times, at least. It was a long elegant face carrying a joyful, almost religious pleasure that he only hoped he could give to his future wife, at least once in her life.

"You're not seeing it," Scott complained.

Phillip had to ask, "What are we supposed to see?"

"This woman," Scott blurted. "She lives on our street, Ted."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oh, crap.

"She's that blond lady with twins. Remember? She and her husband moved in last winter, while she was still pregnant...."

"Was it?"

"Was it what?"

"Her. That mom with twins."

He says, "I hadn't realized it until then. But it sure looked like her, yeah."

"Well, I guess that's not too surprising," she decides. "Since whoever took those pictures probably lived somewhere close."

"Not surprising at all," he agrees.

"But you know what does surprise me, hearing this?"

"I think I can make a good guess."

"The years."

He makes a neutral sound.

"They don't add up right."

He says nothing.

A long, thoughtful pause ends with the declaration, "That'll have to wait, I guess." Then she says, "Go on and tell me: What happened next?"

THE BOYS STARTED keeping watch over the neighbor's house. Ted particularly kept tabs on it. The ordinary split-level stood across the street, two lots removed from Ted's bedroom window. With binoculars, he could see the front yard and part of the back. In those first four mornings, the young husband emerged before seven-thirty. He was a tall man, far too skinny to be the fellow in the pictures. He would happily kiss his babies good-bye and hug his adulterous wife before driving off to the city. Then around nine or nine-thirty, the young woman would put the babies into her car and run a few errands, returning before noon with a trunk full of shopping sacks. It was that second morning, not long after she had vanished, that Ted went outside with a half-inflated football. He kicked it down the street and back again, and then he kicked it hard enough to drop it into her front yard. Then he pretended to shank the punt, placing the ball into the woman's fenced backyard. Nobody was home;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what did it matter? He walked through the gate to recover what was his, and then slowly circled the rest of the house, peering into every window until he felt certain that the shag carpet in the finished basement was the same as the carpet visible in the photograph.

The babies took naps after lunch, it seemed. That's when the woman would step alone into the backyard, wearing a single-piece swimsuit and white paste on her pretty little nose. In the binoculars, she looked to be in her twenties, with tall legs and a little thickness around her waist. Her hair was long and straw-colored, and it couldn't have been any straighter. For an hour or two, she would sit on a chaise lounge, not really sunbathing but enjoying her quiet time with magazines and little naps. Then she would step back inside, not appearing again until around six o'clock when her husband came home again.

Except on the fourth day, things were different.

Ted was sitting next to his window. It was after lunch when he saw Scott emerge from his house and pause in front of the woman's house, shamelessly staring at the curtains. Then he strolled past Ted, glancing up with a possessed grin before heading for the woods and the backpack. A few minutes later, Phillip rode past on his bike, heading in the same direction. The woman still hadn't appeared, and Ted began to suspect that she wouldn't. Maybe one of her babies couldn't sleep. Whatever the reason, he felt a strong urge to follow his friends; but then a pedestrian appeared down the block — a man of no particular description who was wearing nothing of note, walking up the slight slope and then pausing to glance both ways before crossing the street, never breaking stride, calmly walking along the driveway and up the concrete steps that led to the woman's front door.

The door opened and closed, seemingly of its own volition.

The man had vanished.

For as long as he could stand it, Ted waited. But his patience and strength only carried him for a few minutes. He picked up the football and stepped outside, flinging it down the street and running after it, then picking the ball up again, trying hard to kick it exactly the same way as he did before.

The football spiraled into the wrong backyard.

Ted ignored his mistake. He lifted the latch of the woman's gate,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stepped through and carefully set it down again. The finished basement was at the back of the house, on the ground floor. Two days ago, the curtains had been pulled wide open, letting him stare through the sliding glass doors. But now they were pulled shut — heavy gray curtains bleached by sunshine — and for another minute or two, the boy stood on the concrete patio, trying to will the curtains to part, flooding the room with honest light.

He thought about running away.

Then came the sensation of being watched, and Ted turned slowly, looking at the adjacent houses. Had any neighbors seen him? What kind of trouble was he going to be in now?

He didn't care, he realized.

Suddenly his hand reached out. As if watching someone else's fingers, he saw them grab hold of the warm steel handle of the door, and with a firm push, the unlocked door moved slightly. The stiff curtain bent toward him in response, cold air playing across his bare forearm. He took a moment to gather himself. Then his hand reached around the curtain, and he crept close and took a deep breath and held it, and tried to get so close that when he pulled the curtain aside, no sunlight would shine indoors. He would have his own little window on whatever was happening, and Ted was so sure of his plan that he didn't notice the touch of two fingers on the back of his hand. He was standing against the curtain and the fingers touched him and then pulled away, and he noticed their absence instead. Then he leaped back and watched in horror as a thick hairy hand — a hand almost as familiar as his own — pushed between the curtain and jamb, pulling the door shut again, and this time locking it with a clear, sharp thunk.

"Oh, God."

He doesn't reply.

"Go on. Sorry to interrupt. Go on."

Ted found his friends sitting on the slab of old concrete, huddled around their treasure. Scott had found the time to purchase his own magnifying glass — a bigger, better model. Phillip was using his glass to study another picture. No, that wasn't what he was doing exactly. As Ted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

approached, he realized the boy had turned a picture over, and he was staring intently at the stiff gray backing.

"What are you doing?" Ted asked.

Then before anybody could answer, he added, "I just saw our guy. I'm sure it's him. He's with the blond right now, doing her."

Both boys looked up at him, visibly impressed.

"Did you get to see them doing it?" Scott asked.

"Nearly," was Ted's reply.

Scott groaned as if in pain, and he immediately started hunting for her photograph.

Phillip had a clearer understanding of these matters. Waving his magnifying glass, he asked, "So you didn't see anything?"

"Not really."

"But he's there now?"

"He was. Ten minutes ago."

Phillip tried to talk. "Maybe we should — " he managed to say. But then he interrupted himself, asking Ted, "Did you see our guy's face?"

"Sort of."

Scott turned paler than ever, and he lifted his arm, pointing when he gasped, "Is that him?"

The man was standing fifty feet behind Ted. By all appearances, he was unremarkable — a smallish fellow of no particular age, with a modest gut and shaggy dark hair. His clothes weren't rich or special. His features would never be called handsome, and they were very nearly forgettable. But his eyes were hot and black and very small, and he managed to project an intensity that earned a frightened silence from his audience.

"I want them back," the stranger said slowly, firmly.

Scott pulled the photographs into his lap.

That made the man smile. He stepped closer, and even more quietly, he said, "They belong to me."

"So what the hell are they?" Phillip asked. Then he answered his own question, admitting, "They're not like any porn I've seen. And this stuff they're glued to — "

"Yes?"

"I've been looking. Close." Phillip stood up — a small boy brandishing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his magnifying glass as if it could serve as a weapon. "That backing of theirs. To me, it looks like dried skin."

Ted felt weak and cold.

The man gave an appreciative nod.

"Human skin, is it?"

"I'll tell you," the man said. "If you give all of those pictures back to me now. I'll tell."

Phillip made up his mind. In a moment, he snatched everything out of Scott's grasp, shoving them into the backpack and tossing the pack underhand.

The man caught the pack without letting those fiery eyes leave Phillip's face. Then he explained, "Human skin does work and works very well, but there are substitutes. Easier to find, and a lot easier to use."

"Use for what?" Ted muttered.

"Well," said the man, "to make a very strong soup."

"What do you want with soup?" Scott blurted out skeptically.

"I rather like to eat it." Then he pulled a photograph from the pack — the blond woman on her hands and knees, as it happened — and he said a few odd words before placing the corner of the photo's backing into his own mouth, biting off a piece of the skin and swallowing it whole.

The boys glanced at one another.

Grinning, the man began to turn away.

"Leave the pictures," Scott begged. "Just a little while longer, please...."

The ageless wizard began to laugh. Quietly, he laughed at Scott and at all of them. "But what would be the point?" he inquired. "The flesh is as seasoned as you can make it, my boys. My soup can't be any richer. My good boys. My dear little men."

Silence.

Then she asks, "Is that it?"

"Pretty much," he concedes.

"The pervert...the wizard...what did he do next?"

"Just walked off and vanished."

"And did you ever see him again?"

"No."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She thinks for a long while. Then with a sigh, she says, "What year was that?"

"1970. In the summer."

"Thirty-seven years ago."

"Sure."

"And you should be in your fifties now."

He says nothing.

"If this is true," she says, and then she pulls back. "I don't know, Ted...."

"What don't you know?"

"If I can believe any of this."

"Nobody is making you," he says. But then he points out, "You're the one who openly and fervently believes in magic."

"You didn't find the wizard again?"

"I said I didn't. No."

"But that kind of magic...with the skins backing the pictures, and those words that he said...did you find out how to do the trick...?"

In a certain way, he says nothing.

"Ted?"

Nothing.

"Ted?"

"What?"

"I have a camera."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For readers who missed the first part of this story last month, we'll bring you up to speed with a synopsis. For those of you who have been waiting, here you go — presented without commercial interruption, it's the conclusion of Guth Bandar's current story arc.

The Helper and His Hero

Part 2

By Matthew Hughes

THE STORY SO FAR —

THE NOÖNAUT GUTH Bandar has always longed to travel the Swept, a vast prairie known for its brillion mines and dangerous wildlife, that is also the battleground where, long ago, an invasion by a horde of telepathic insectoid aliens known as the Dree was defeated. Finally afforded the opportunity, Guth rides a balloon-tram to Farflung, where he will board the landship *Orgulon*, on behalf of a fictitious brother who suffers from the lassitude — the first new fatal disease in millennia to strike Old Earth. He almost immediately runs into a pair of fellow travelers who also only pretend to have the disease; though Guth meets them as Phlevas Wasselthorpe and his mentor Erenti Abbas, he eventually learns that they are Bureau of Scrutiny agents Baro Harkless and Luff Imbry. The two undercover scroots are out to apprehend the notorious confidence trickster Horslan Gebbling, who has hired the *Orgulon* and offered a free cruise for victims of the lassitude.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

During their journey, Guth teaches Harkless about the noösphere, and the scroot demonstrates an uncanny — and dangerous — affinity for navigating the Commons, which prompts Guth to want nothing more to do with the young man, who he fears may be absorbed and tipped into permanent psychosis. But when his attempts to escape Baro's company are thwarted, Guth suspects that their fates are entwined and that he is being inexorably pressed into the role of Helper to Harkless's archetypal Sacrificial Hero.

The *Orgulon*'s security officer, Raina Haj, had earlier prevented anyone from leaving after a passenger plunged to his death from the foredeck of the landship. Now, with Guth, Baro, Imbry, and four other passengers stranded in the vast emptiness of the Swept, that death is revealed to be cold-blooded murder. And the murderer is about to use an energy pistol to eliminate all the witnesses....

AS THE MURDERER'S thumb touched the control, the grass behind him opened and the missing Rover burst into the clearing, running at a four-legged gallop low to the ground. He rose to his hind legs and leapt to smash bodily into the officer's back, sending him sprawling. Then Yaffak rolled clear and came smoothly to his hind feet, ready to strike again.

Harkless and Imbry, the two undercover Bureau of Scrutiny agents, sprang forward. So did Haj. But the villain had the almost admirable concentration Bandar had seen before in persons with psyches dominated by darker elements. He was already levering himself to his knees and aiming the energy pistol. It discharged just as Harkless struck him with a flying tackle, and its concentrated beam of force sliced the air like a long thin blade.

Then it was over. The man was face down on the ground, his wrists pinioned by a restraint, and Haj had secured both pistols. Yaffak took a brief look at the defeated prisoner, then, Rover-like, walked unconcernedly away to summon his team of shuggras from where they crouched in the long grass. He quickly rehitched their harness to the cart.

They pulled the killer to his feet. He gave them a look that expressed no apology. They prepared to board the gig but the fat agent — Imbry, Bandar recalled, was his name — had discovered that the long discharge

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the energy pistol had disabled its controls. They would have to press on by Rover cart.

Haj enlisted Bandar to translate as she asked the Rover to take them east to where the day camp was set up.

"No," said Yaffak.

Now Imbry had a question. He pointed to the bound man and wanted to know why Yaffak had attacked him.

"For the Good Man," Yaffak said, his eyes going to Harkless.

Harkless said, "Why for me?"

Yaffak struggled to express his thoughts. "In the other place, the bad thing, the bad rope. Good Man come, cut rope, make me free."

Bandar asked, "How did you know he was the Good Man?"

Yaffak sniffed loudly and described Harkless's odor in terms that only a Rover truly understood. Bandar translated for the others.

The young agent wanted to know what Yaffak thought had restrained him in the dream. The Rover did not want to talk about it. The loose skin on his shoulders shook and his ruff rose in agitation.

"He lacks the words," Bandar said. "To him it was just a bad dream."

Harkless asked if the Rover would take him where the other Rovers had carried the other passengers.

Yaffak looked down and to the side. Bandar translated the posture as one of the Rovers' ways of saying no. Then Yaffak said to Harkless, "Come west, hunt skippit. Big food. Good fun."

"I must go to the others," Harkless said.

Bandar was amazed to see the Rover's face take on a look of unwilling resolution. "For you, Yaffak goes east. Take people not sick. Leave wrong, leave dead." He looked at the bound prisoner. "Leave killer, let eaters find."

Bandar translated.

Ule Gazz began to protest but Harkless cut her off. Bandar saw the Hero's determination glowing in the young man's eyes as he told Yaffak that the sick must go with them.

"Not sick," Yaffak said. "Sick is belly pain, food comes up. These not sick. Smell *wrong*."

Harkless asked the others if Rovers got the lassitude. No one knew. He spoke again to Yaffak. "Did your pack smell like these?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yaffak struggled to express himself. "Rovers smell like Rovers, not *do* like Rovers. Yaffak see them wrong but not feel them wrong. Then Yaffak in bad place, Good Man come, free Yaffak. Then see and feel Rovers wrong. Yaffak angry-scared, run to grass."

Bandar translated as best he could, then added his view that Yaffak had had a traumatic experience and did not want to meet the "wrong" Rovers again.

Harkless suggested a compromise: if the Rover would take them to within sight of the mining town of Victor, he would not ask him to go near his packmates.

Yaffak said, "For Good Man, will do."

And he must take the sick, the young agent insisted.

"Not sick, wrong," Yaffak insisted, but then lowered his head.

"He agrees to take them, too," Bandar said.

Flix's body went into the gig, secure from predators under a locked canopy. The rest reboarded the cart, laying the first officer face down in the aisle between the seats. Bandar sat in his former seat near the front so that he could translate if required. The two agents sat nearby and soon fell into a discussion with Raina Haj regarding their pursuit of the confidence trickster posing as Father Olwyn. The conversation led nowhere, since none could envision how the fraudster stood to gain from mounting an expensive cruise for lassitude sufferers who were, for the most part, not wealthy. They thought it might have something to do with black brillion.

Bandar also learned that Haj was herself an undercover agent of the Bureau of Scrutiny who had been in pursuit of the man lying on the floor. The *Orgulon*'s first officer — his name was Kosmir — had been involved in some complex scheme to murder Flix's companion, once a celebrated artist but whose reputation had faded, in order to drive up the value of the man's works. Flix, it seemed, had been his unwitting dupe.

None of this meant much to Bandar. He focused not on the back-and-forth between the officers, nor on Ule Gazz's futile attempts to defend Olwyn, but on Baro Harkless. Earlier, he had called him narrow and strange, and had formed the impression that the young man had grown up peculiar. He seemed to be missing not only common knowledge, but certain elements of a normal personality. His being a Bureau agent explained nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He is too simple, the noönaut thought. *His psyche is not the subtle blend of tints and shades that emerge from the interaction of a varied mix of elements. It is as if he has been painted only in primary colors.*

Bandar had studied naturals in his undergraduate years at the Institute. This Harkless was not quite like those loons, even though it was obvious to a noönaut's eye that the Hero archetype was growing increasingly dominant within him. It was there to be seen in the gleam of the eye and the set of the jaw.

No, not a natural. But not quite a fully rendered human, either. He was hypothesizing rare neuronic disorders caused by accidents in the womb, when the picture suddenly fell into focus. He played back in his memory the young man's interaction with the other agents and the passengers, and particularly how he had behaved with Bandar himself.

Now he remembered his first impression of Harkless, when he and Imbry had come aboard the balloon-tram: he had reminded Bandar of the idiomatic entities that populated the Locations of the Commons. If that were so, it meant that where normal human beings had complex structures, Baro Harkless had empty spaces, where humans had personalities, he had only a selection of interconnected characteristics. It was debatable whether the young man was a person at all, or just a facsimile of one.

Bandar had never felt empathy for idiomats he had encountered in the Commons. But for an idiomat loose in the waking world, Bandar had to feel sympathy. What a strange growing up it must have been, like being able to see only black and white while navigating a world whose directional signs were all color coded.

After a while, the cart left the Swept and drove up a sloping ramp of stone onto the Monument. This was a vast assemblage of close-fitted blocks of gray rock that formed the image of a man's helmeted head and neck, so large that it was easily visible from near orbit. It was said to be the likeness of the commander whose strategy had defeated the Dree. The mining town of Victor, near the Monument's southeast extremity, was also believed to have been named for him.

The immense platform of stone was ten times a man's height. Travelers who ascended to its upper surface found a great plain of featureless rock, with here and there a growth of hardy grass or thorny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brush sprouting from cracks and fissures opened by the alternation over eons of winter cold and summer heat.

They were crossing at the Monument's narrowest stretch, the neck, and Yaffak was whipping his shuggras along. Soon they would reach the down-ramp that sloped back onto the prairie, and shortly thereafter they should come to the day camp where the *Orgulon* would meet them. The mystery of the murder being concluded, Bandar intended to make strong representations to be allowed to leave immediately.

Harkless touched his shoulder and he turned. "I offended you and I am sorry," the young agent said. "I am surprised that I have attracted the Hero, since I have surely spent my life playing the Fool."

Bandar felt a upsurge of feeling for the unhappy youth. "You did nothing that was ill-meant," he said. "Perhaps I have been too proud of my learning."

Harkless then made an unexpected proposal. "When this business is done, might you consider taking me as a student noönaut? The Commons does draw me."

"You would leave the Bureau of Scrutiny?"

Harkless referred to a conversation he had had with his partner, Imbry. "He believes that, in life, some are called, and some are driven. Until now, it appears that I have been one of the driven. Now I have found something that calls me."

Again, Bandar felt an urge to help the young man and his first instinct was to fight it. But when he looked into the unhappy face he saw no glint of the Hero, just a lost and lonely child. And then a thought occurred: a noönaut with the power to move between Commonses would be an unparalleled innovation. Whole new schools might open. Bandar imagined returning to the Institute like a thunderclap.

His attention was drawn to a faint sound from the rear of the cart. Ule Gazz's hands were palpating her throat. Open mouthed, she struggled to chant the *ta-tumpa, ta-tey*, but could produce only a dry croaking. Across the aisle from her, Pollus Ermatage had also fallen silent. She reached to touch Gazz's jaw, then felt her own throat. When she spoke, her voice was weak: "Ule Gazz has the lassitude. As do I."

Bandar raised his fingers to his own neck and jaw. Nothing seemed amiss, but his determination to leave grew stronger.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

They reached the far side of the Monument's neck and saw the town of Victor out on the Swept. It was a small, unpretentious mining town, with a scattering of buildings linked by a few paved roads beneath the elevated structures that marked where the shafts of two almost-played-out brillion mines descended into the Earth. Beyond the town, at a flattened berm of tailings that served as a landship wharf, stood the *Orgulon*. Just south of the wharf, Rovertown began, a sprawl of unpretentious habitations where the Rovers lived in close proximity to their shuggras.

A wave of relief went through Bandar, and even the newly stricken lassitude sufferers seemed to show hope. But from his seat at the front of the cart, Yaffak snuffled the air and pointed with his nose. "Dead eaters," he said.

Bandar told the others that the Rover had spotted a flock of stingwhiffles between them and Victor. A congregation of the leathery-winged carrion eaters meant something lay dead on the prairie.

They found a ramp leading down onto the Swept and descended. The stingwhiffles were contending over something in the grass not far off the cart trail that went toward Victor.

Haj's voice took on a worried note. "The tents and tables were set up there. Olwyn was about to go into his act when I left to find you people."

They came to a place where the grass was flattened. Upturned folding tables and shreds of fabric lay scattered about, the buffet table and its heaps of truffle cuisine tipped over. Yaffak pulled up and the three agents dismounted.

Bandar followed them but paused to ask Yaffak, "Do you smell fand or woollyclaw?"

The Rover's nose winnowed the air and he turned to scan in every direction. The muscles of his neck twitched and his ruff stood erect, but he said, "No."

Haj set her pistol for wide dispersal and swept a beam of yellow energy through the circling stingwhiffles. The gaggle that had been squabbling over whatever was on the ground burst into the air in a squawking cloud of leather.

Bandar hung back and said, "What is there?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is that white-haired woman from the landship," Harkless said.

He knelt to examine the remains. Bandar came up behind him. Brand Halorn's flesh was torn by long, deep wounds and her head was half-severed from her neck. "That is not the work of stingwhiffles," he said.

Haj thought it might have been a woollyclaw, but if so, the people of nearby Victor would be out in force.

"And what of this?" said Imbry. He had found nearby what looked to be a discarded garment of cloth and leather. He held it up then almost retched as he realized what it was: a human skin, split open along the spine and with ribbons of flesh where the hands and feet should have been.

Bandar recognized its owner. "The birthmark," he said. "It is her husband."

"This is not a woollyclaw's doing," said Haj. She searched the grass. "His clothes are here, torn to pieces, and his skin. But where is the body? Where is the blood?"

Harkless said, "We should go into town. This place is not safe." But Imbry counseled against it. The town was silent when its inhabitants should have been astir.

Haj exerted her seniority. She had one of the landships' short-range communicators and now sought to contact the *Orgulon*. But the signal could not get through. She tried her Bureau of Scrutiny plaque, a more sophisticated instrument, but again it was as if the frequency was blocked.

She then gave her second pistol to Harkless and declared that she would walk to the *Orgulon*, circling around the town. The captain was a capable man and would be able to tell her the situation.

Someone was shouting, back where Yaffak had remained with his cart. Bandar and the agents hurried there to find that the noise came from the prisoner Kosmir. The Rover was hauling him from the vehicle. The two couples who had succumbed to the lassitude were lying in a row in the grass. Ule Gazz was struggling to get her feet under her, but the disease was rapidly stealing her mobility; the other three lay motionless, and Bandar saw that Ebersol and Sooke, who had caught the disease first, had reached the stage of stark rigidity and polished skin, as if they had been waxed. Their eyes were as stone.

Yaffak set Kosmir upright, then turned back to the cart to bring out the two come-alongs. He closed and locked the tailboard.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Raina Haj confronted the Rover and demanded to know his intent. Yaffak dropped his eyes and said, "No more. Wrong smell, all over. Town, these." He gestured at the lassitude victims. "Yaffak goes."

Bandar translated. Haj told the Rover they would skirt the town and go to the landship.

Yaffak said, "Yaffak goes."

Haj looked grim and drew her energy pistol.

Yaffak did not flinch. "Shooting bad. Some things more bad. Yaffak goes."

Haj reholstered the weapon. The Rover made to climb into the driver's seat, but instead he turned toward Harkless. "Good Man come with Yaffak. Safe."

Bandar translated and saw in the agent's eyes a response to the Rover's obvious affection. But then the noönaut saw the Hero harden Harkless's young face.

"I cannot," Harkless said. "Something else calls me."

Yaffak mounted the cart, turned the team back toward the Monument, and with one backward regretful glance, he was gone.

The three agents now fell into a procedural argument about who had authority to decide what to do next. Harkless quoted from manuals while Haj looked uncomfortable and made remarks about risking her career. Bandar paid no attention. He studied the four lassitude victims. All the chanting and chuffe raising had done nothing to address the conditions of those who boarded the *Orgulon* already in the clutch of the disease; if anything, it seemed to have hurried them to the crisis; worse, those who had not had the disease to begin with had developed galloping cases.

He wondered if that result, rather than a cure, had been the intent of the cruise. Was Father Olwyn, or Horslan Gebbling, actively promoting the spread of the disease, possibly out of some apocalyptic motive? Bandar had seen many versions of the Mad Messiah preserved in the Locations of the Commons. Could Olwyn be psychically captive to such a dangerous archetype? Might a cult have sprung up around his charismatic presence, a millennial sect out to bring on the end of the world through pestilence?

If so, the chanting would not have had any effect. But perhaps bringing many sufferers together in close quarters amplified the disease's onslaught, as if they transferred spores back and forth to each other and.... And then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it struck him: the other common factor had been the truffles of the Swept; they had been the main ingredient in almost every dish that had come out of the landship's galley, even the gruel fed to the ill.

Bandar had not cared for the taste and had eaten little of it. He was, as much as he could tell, unvisited by the lassitude. He was pursuing this line of inquiry when he heard Harkless speak his name.

"Bandar and I will tend to the sick," the agent had said. The noönaut regarded the earnest young face and saw more than mere traces of the Hero in his expression of stern resolve. And the cavalier way he had included Bandar in his plan was exactly the manner in which a Hero assumed decisions for his Helper.

Still, Bandar would be of no use in an expedition to the town or the landship. If a death cult had sprung up — *Might the Rovers have succumbed*? he thought; he knew little of whatever piety they might practice — Bandar would rather stay on the Monument.

That was where they carried the paralyzed, Harkless and Haj slinging the still bendable Gazz and Ermatage over their shoulders while Imbry and Bandar towed Ebersol and Sooke on their come-alongs. Kosmir walked ahead of the party, with Harkless's energy pistol trained on him.

Back atop the Monument, they laid the four paralytics on the sun-warmed stone. The three agents used their plaques to inspect the deserted streets of Victor and Rovertown. They saw evidence of violence and the discharge of energy weapons, conferring about these matters in low voices. But Bandar could hear enough; he would stay out of the town.

Haj left to make her way to the landship. Harkless ordered the prisoner to sit apart from the sick. "If you try to stand I will shoot you in the leg," he said, then turned to Bandar. "Shout if he moves."

Bandar said he would, but once again the order was clearly from the Hero to the Helper.

Harkless and Imbry went to look at the four lassitude victims. Imbry thought the crisis would soon be upon them. Harkless knelt beside Ule Gazz, then expressed surprise that apparently she continued to try to chant Olwyn's last mantra. He took off his Institute scarf and folded it to make a pad under Pollus Ermatage's head.

The two agents left the sick and returned to where Bandar watched Kosmir.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If whatever attacked that loud woman comes for us," the prisoner said, "I would be more use without this restraint."

Harkless would not hear of it. "You will take your chances as you are," he said, reminding the prisoner that he had seen him kill Flix after murdering her companion for financial gain.

Kosmir quoted an unflattering saying about the likelihood of securing mercy from a scroot.

Harkless sighted along his pistol and said, "In an emergency, you would be even more hampered by the loss of some toes."

"You wouldn't," said Kosmir.

"I'm increasingly sure that I will if you do not stop talking."

Bandar heard the tone even stronger now. The young man was slipping ever more firmly into the grip of the Hero.

They sat without talking, Harkless watching the town while Bandar watched Harkless. After a while, the noönaut sought to probe the extent to which the agent was affected.

He chose an indirect line of inquiry. "The call you said you felt, might it be a vocation to explore the Commons?"

Harkless mulled the question then said that something about the noösphere called to him. A moment later, he clarified his answer: something *in* the noösphere was calling him, though he knew not what called nor what he was called to do.

Bandar admitted to being conflicted. It delighted him that Harkless's strange facility for the Commons might open up new avenues of research. But he did not like to think that he had been an instrument to put the young man in peril of being absorbed.

Harkless told him not to worry. "The instrument is never responsible, only the hand that employs it." Besides, if it was his fate to be where he was, then perhaps it was also Bandar's.

The calm with which he accepted the possibility of imminent doom was quintessentially that of the Hero Sacrificial, Bandar saw. Moment by moment, there was less and less of Baro Harkless, and more and more of the archetype.

Bandar said, "It would pain me to think that my life-long love of the noösphere has been not truly of my own will but just a part of some grand plot."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harkless paid no attention. The noönaut watched as an intense stillness came over the young man's face. He sat staring at nothing for a long while and Bandar saw the grim certitude of the Hero gain a stronger hold.

Suddenly the young man's eyes went wide and he said, "What?" and looked at Kosmir as if he thought the prisoner had spoken, though Bandar knew that whatever voice Harkless had heard had come from deep within.

The agent now turned to Bandar and said, "Did you speak to me?"

"No." Bandar kept his voice even, but it worried him that the young fellow was now hearing a voice. That was a long step beyond merely being influenced by an archetype. He sought to plant an antidote to the growing poisoning of the young man's psyche by the Hero by offering another archetype as a focus for Harkless's thoughts. Because to name was to summon, Bandar deliberately chose the most effective counter to the Hero, saying, "The voice probably came from the Wise Man."

Bandar saw speculation in the agent's eyes. *Good,* he thought, *Heroes do not speculate.* He was searching for a way to keep the process rolling when Kosmir announced that he had something important to say. Immediately, Bandar saw the Hero resurge within the young man.

Harkless pointed the pistol at Kosmir's foot and said, "I do not care to be interrupted when I am thinking."

The prisoner squirmed but pressed on. "It is something the scroots need to know."

The Hero looked out through Harkless's eyes with characteristic disdain for a villain. He heard the Hero's voice tell Kosmir he had other concerns.

The prisoner said he had information about a serious crime.

The Hero's mouth set in a skeptical sneer. "More serious than a double murder?"

"Yes."

Bandar saw Harkless dismiss the subject. The Hero was now back in control and had larger issues to occupy him. Bandar was growing increasingly frightened. They were stranded up here on the bare rock with an armed man who was visibly sinking into the clutches of an archetype. And who was certain to look upon the noönaut as his fated Helper.

"You are Haj's prisoner," the agent told Kosmir. "Reveal all to her when she comes back."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kosmir had a villain's cunning and knew the right thing to say to the Hero. "She may not be coming back. She has likely walked into peril."

Bandar saw a jolt pass through Harkless at the mention of a damsel in distress. Harkless leapt to his feet and brought out his plaque, trying to reach Haj through the short-range emergency frequency. A few undecipherable squawks overlaid by static was all the answer he received.

The agent turned back to Kosmir and Bandar saw the Hero's single-mindedness plain in his young face and heard the Hero's uncompromising voice say, "Tell me."

Kosmir made the mistake of trying to bargain. He wanted the charges dropped and to keep his ill-gotten gains.

But a Hero did not haggle and the prisoner now compounded his error by assuming that he was dealing with a sane scroot. He made demands. The Hero simply discharged the energy pistol into the rock immediately in front of Kosmir's crossed legs. Instantly, the prisoner's calves were splattered with white-hot molten rock. The man shrieked and fell back onto his pinioned arms, frantically rubbing his legs against each other, trying to remove the lava from his smoldering flesh.

Harkless calmly aimed the pistol at Kosmir's feet and asked if he found the terms satisfactory.

Bandar said, "That was unnecessarily cruel."

Typical of a Hero approaching the crisis, Harkless paid the Helper no heed. He put his thumb on the weapon's activation stud and said, "Well?"

Kosmir announced that he would tell all. Harkless gestured with the pistol to suggest that he do so quickly.

Kosmir began to talk, telling an involved tale about having overheard one side of a conversation involving Gebbling. He had not been able to hear the other communicant's voice, but he had heard enough to make out the elements of a plot to spread the lassitude, which was apparently somehow caused by eating truffles of the Swept. Bandar did not pay close attention; he was more concerned with the obvious transformation that was overcoming young Baro Harkless. There was less and less of Harkless left to see in the face that confronted Kosmir, and the hand that held the pistol did not waver.

Bandar said, "Ask the Wise Man to evaluate this information."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Hero pressed on with his interrogation. Bandar repeated his words, but now he was sure that no one was there to hear them.

Kosmir tried to hold back some crucial element of what he knew, to keep something he might trade to his advantage. The Hero aimed the pistol and offered to burn off his feet.

Kosmir talked on. Finally the Hero that had filled Harkless was satisfied. It had Harkless take out his Bureau of Scrutiny plaque and again try to contact Haj. This time, there was a reply, but not from the missing sergeant. Instead, a new voice spoke from the air, announcing that this was a restricted frequency and demanding to know who was using it.

"Baro Harkless, agent ordinary." The words came from the agent's mouth, but Bandar could hear the Hero speaking them.

The voice from the air identified itself as that of Directing Agent Ardmander Arboghast of the Bureau of Scrutiny. Harkless reported to him that he believed Raina Haj was in danger. He also told his superior that he had discovered the source of the lassitude.

Arboghast told him that everything was now secure and asked for his location. Harkless told him where he and the others were and that they had four people critically ill with the disease. Arboghast ordered him to remain where he was; help was on the way.

Harkless looked down at Kosmir with the uncompromising stare of the Hero. "The Bureau knows everything," he said. "You have nothing to bargain with."

A sly look had crept over Kosmir. He said, "I have something now."

Harkless said he could try it on the senior scroot when he got there.

The prisoner said, "This is something you need to know, and before he arrives."

Baro took out the pistol again. "Shall I burn off a toe?"

Kosmir affected an air of unconcern and told Harkless he could shoot if he wished. The pain would not last long.

Bandar saw puzzlement in the Hero's face. "What makes you say that?" Harkless said.

Kosmir mocked him with a simpering expression. "I say it because none of us here has long to live, not me, not you, nor those sick lumps, unless you listen to what I can tell you."

Harkless looked over at where the lassitude sufferers lay inert. Olleg

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ebersol was having trouble breathing. Imbry struggled up from where he was sitting and went over to him.

Bandar saw Harkless's face reflect the pity that the Hero reflexively showed toward helpless victims. Then he saw it harden back into a grim mask as the Hero turned back to Kosmir. The pistol did not waver as it came to bear on the prisoner's feet.

"Tell me, or die one piece at a time."

Bandar tried to reason with the archetype. "It is evil to torture a prisoner."

The Hero turned toward the noönaut and in the glitter of his eyes Bandar saw only the faintest trace of the young man Harkless, and heard almost nothing but pure archetype in the voice that answered him. "It is he who is evil. I do what is necessary."

Some of Harkless was still there, but what little was left of him was sinking rapidly. Bandar made an attempt to reach him. "You are allowing yourself to be absorbed by an archetype, to be made into a simple-minded monster. Fight it."

The noönaut saw a gleam of a response deep in the unblinking eyes, but then the Hero's voice said, "I do not wish to fight it." He looked back at Kosmir with casual coldness and aimed the weapon.

Bandar stood up and sang eight notes. It was a subthran that interfered with the perceptions of a specific subset of the Hero archetype that included the Hero Sacrificial — interfered with them in the Commons, that is. He had no idea if the sequence would have any effect in the waking world, but he could think of nothing else to do.

He continued to sing the eight notes, over and over again. The Hero looked at him curiously, then the hardness in the eyes softened and Bandar saw Baro Harkless re-emerge. The young man blinked and said, "I have broken through. Thank you."

"You must continue to fight its influence," said Bandar.

Harkless said he would try. He bent and helped Kosmir sit upright. "Whatever you were holding back, tell me now," he said.

"I will if you first free me," Kosmir said, his eyes searching the sky to the east over Victor and the Rovers' town. "But there is no time to waste."

"If the information is truly important, I promise to free you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But Kosmir was not a man to trust a scroot, especially one who had moments before given him a convincing display of madness.

Nor did Harkless have cause to trust the prisoner.

"We have reached an impasse," Harkless said.

"An impasse that will not last," said Kosmir. He pointed with his chin to the vehicle that had risen above the town. "Free me before that aircar gets here. After will be too late."

Bandar looked and saw an official scroot volante. Harkless saw it too.

Now Kosmir was pleading, scootching around on his buttocks to present his restrained arms to Harkless.

"You are trying to trick me," Harkless said.

"I think he is not," Bandar said. "His fear seems genuine."

"He has reason to be afraid. That aircar will take him on a journey that ends in the contemplarium."

Kosmir was frantic. "No, the aircar brings death to all of us!"

The thrum of the aircar's gravity obviators grew louder. Harkless chewed his lip as he regarded the prisoner, then Bandar saw that the scroot had made his decision. The agent reset the weapon's controls. He aimed it at the holdtight.

The gargling noise from Ebersol was growing louder. It drew Harkless's attention to where the four inert sufferers lay, tended by Luff Imbry.

"They are coming to the catharsis," Bandar said. "Death will soon end their suffering."

"Ignore them!" Kosmir said. "Release me!"

Harkless directed a pulse of energy into the restraint's control center. The holdtight broke open and clattered onto the rock. Kosmir leapt to his feet, swinging his arms to bring the blood back into his hands. "Set your pistol on maximum!" he said. "When the aircar tries to land, shoot it down!"

Harkless gave him a skeptical look and made no move to adjust the weapon's setting. Kosmir spoke frantically — "No time!" and sought to seize the pistol.

Harkless pushed him back, and the man stumbled and fell. "Now who is mad?" the young man said. "It is a Bureau of Scrutiny aircar and its operator is Ardmander Arboghast, my section chief!"

Kosmir put his hands together in the posture of the Reformed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Penitent. Bandar had seen the archetype in many a Class Two Situation and believed the man's emotion to be genuine.

"I lied when I said I'd told you everything!" Kosmir said. "I was holding back something to bargain with — that I did hear the voice of the man who was the mastermind behind the lassitude. I did not know his name but I know that his voice was the same as that of the man you spoke with on your commuicator. Whoever he is, he is responsible for scores of deaths, and he will surely kill us all!"

"No!" Harkless said, "you are trying to trick us!"

Bandar was only half aware of what was going on between the scroot and the pleading prisoner. His eyes were on the four lassitude sufferers. He tugged on the young agent's sleeve. "Baro!" he cried.

The young man swung around and looked to the sky behind them, where the noise of the aircar grew louder.

"No," said Bandar, "look there!" A cold wave of horror crept up his back and he pointed at where the four bodies lay.

Olleg Ebersol was sitting up. Corje Sooke's torso was also rising from the rock. But it was all wrong. *Human beings don't move that way,* Bandar thought. *Nor do they* bend *that way.*

Neither the man nor the woman had bent at the waist, but their upper torsos had levered themselves upright at the point where ribs met diaphragm, the small of the back staying flat on the ground. It shouldn't have happened without bones snapping, but the only sound was a sighing intake and release of breath, remarkably calm.

Now Olleg Ebersol's head turned left then right, rotating almost until his chin went past each shoulder. His arms rose and extended straight out, as if he were reaching for something in the air before him. The man's hands seemed to elongate, the fingers stretching to an impossible length. Then the skin at the fingertips burst, falling back in strips like ribbons, and from them emerged a bundle of dark green sticks, jointed in several places, that unrolled and flexed themselves.

Now the arms with their spiky appendages reached up toward Ebersol's head. Bandar saw the man's skin slide down his arms like loose cuffs, but where bones and flesh should have been exposed was a thick length of the same dark green material, shiny and hard-surfaced as an arthropod's limb. The stick-like digits dug into the flesh at the back of the neck and with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sound like the tearing of coarse cloth the skin of the head was torn away. Where Ebersol's face had been was a featureless rounded oblong of the same dark green, glistening like a beetle's wingcase. Two fern-like antennae unrolled themselves and began to turn as if sampling the air.

Now the claws went again to the skin at the back of the neck and the jointed arms exerted a great strength. Ebersol's clothing split down the back, and with it the skin along his spine also parted. A hard-shelled thorax emerged, then a segmented abdomen, long and cylindrical, finally a pair of lower limbs from which thorn-like spikes sprouted.

Bandar's first thought was, *I have seen that before.* Aloud, he said, "That is a Dree."

The sound of his voice caused the eyeless head to rotate toward him. The tendrils quivered and leaned in his direction. The thing's multi-digited hands and feet underwent a transformation, the spiky appendages suddenly clicking together, each fitting tightly into its neighbors to form solid, curved claws. Bandar looked at those wicked edges and remembered the wounds on Brond Halorn's body.

This is a coincidence, he thought, and the word brought with it all of its terrifying import to a noönaut. All of this — the lassitude, the Dree, the strange young man called to the Commons — they were all part of one great story, a story being acted out not in the theater of the noösphere, but in the waking world. And, for this story, Guth Bandar could not be a detached observer; he must be an active participant.

A second Dree had already torn its way out of what had been Corje Sooke. It stood, its clawed feet rasping on the rock, kicking its legs to free their spikes of the woman's hampering skin. Its antennae questioned the air. Between it and the creature that had come out of Olleg Ebersol, Luff Imbry still knelt where he had been ministering to what they had thought were the dying. Now, as the creatures loomed over him, he scrambled to his feet but stumbled as he tried to put distance between himself and the Dree.

Harkless shouted to him to stand clear and aimed the energy pistol at the one that was already on its feet. But now the first Dree also sprang up, its tendrils quivering toward the sound of the young man's voice. Its hind legs flexed and it flung itself at Harkless. The *zivv* of the energy pistol was accompanied by a beam of focused force that caught the Dree

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the air, burning a hole the size of a fist through its thorax. The thing fell clattering to the rock, its momentum carrying it skidding almost to Harkless's feet.

The second Dree was still seeking to disengage itself from Sooke's skin, but its clawed forelimb had already reached out to snag Imbry's robe, jerking him back as he tried to flee. The fat man twisted around, frantically pulling at the fasteners, trying to free himself from the garment. The cloth enveloped his head.

Bandar looked to Harkless and saw that the Hero had come back into the young man's face. *Well, if there ever was a time for a Hero...*, the noönaut thought. The young agent calmly aimed the pistol at the Dree that was attacking his partner. But as his thumb moved to the discharge control, Bandar heard him gasp in agony and looked down to see that the first Dree, though dying, had sunk a talon into the flesh of the young man's calf and was raising a second clawed limb to open his belly.

Harkless's pierced leg collapsed under him, but even as he fell he placed the weapon against the Dree's faceless head and fired. The green smoothness blackened, then exploded. Harkless yanked its claw from his flesh and aimed at the one that had seized Imbry.

The fat agent had not been able to pull free of his garment before the Dree had disentangled itself from Corje Sooke's shed skin. The man had fallen heavily onto his face, and now the creature was upon him, its powerful hind legs ready to rip him apart.

Harkless fired the pistol into the Dree in a sustained discharge that obliterated its head and upper body. But Imbry did not stir.

"I will tend to him," Bandar said. "You must deal with the other two." The lumps that had been Ule Gazz and Pollus Ermatage were twitching the way the first two had just before the emergence.

The Hero looked at him through Harkless's eyes. "You opposed me," it said.

A chill went through Bandar, but he thought fast. "I am your Helper. It is my duty to oppose you when I see you go the wrong way."

The eyes held on him for a long moment, then the Hero nodded. It rose and limped on Harkless's injured leg to where Imbry lay, pulled back the cloth from the head. Bandar came with him. "See, he lives," the noönaut said. "Now kill the other Dree before they emerge."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Hero knelt, adjusting the weapon to maximum discharge and aimed at the jerking chrysalises that had been Gazz and Ermatage.

The thrumming of a powerful aircar was suddenly loud all round them, and the wind of its bowfront wave swept over the scene. Bandar turned to see a Bureau of Scrutiny volante alighting almost upon them. A man of mature years stepped from the vehicle. He wore the green and black uniform of a Bureau officer and a face that made Bandar's heart sink. *This one, too, is fully in the grip of an archetype,* he thought. And it looked to be one of the worst: the Tyrant.

The Hero glanced back at the new arrival as the scroot officer took from a belt holster the standard Bureau sidearm: a shocker. The Hero turned back to the Dree and said, "I do not think your weapon will do more than subdue them temporarily. They are a deadly offworld species."

"I know," said the Tyrant in black and green. Then it raised the shocker and shot the young man.

The Hero fell senseless to the ground and the Tyrant stepped nimbly forward and seized the energy pistol. It aimed the weapon at Bandar and said, "If you want to live, do as I say."

Bandar indicated that he would accept the suggestion, but first indicated the prone Luff Imbry. "I think this man is only stunned," he said.

"Leave him, but bring the young one." Bandar knew better than to argue and went to where Harkless lay.

The Tyrant turned to where Kosmir had stood, frozen with fear, during the violence. "You, help him."

But the landship officer was in the grip of terror. He said something unintelligible then turned and ran, heading west out onto the expanse of the Monument. The Tyrant in the Bureau uniform raised the pistol, then lowered it. It turned a cruel face toward Bandar and said, "Hurry, they will soon emerge," then helped the noönaut drag Harkless's unconscious form to the aircar. They manhandled him into the prisoner's compartment; then the Tyrant ordered Bandar in after him. "There are bandages and restorative in the first-aid kit," it said, before climbing into the operator's position and lifting the volante into the air. They hovered at a low height in silent mode.

Bandar watched through the transparent canopy as the last two Dree

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ripped themselves free. They stood, digits opening and closing into claws, their tendrils straining toward the two charred corpses. Then a distant sound caught their attention and, as one, their faceless heads and questing antennae turned west.

Far out on the Monument the tiny figure of the landship officer ran. Kosmir's legs pumped with fear-fueled energy, his arms pistoning tight against his sides.

Bandar saw the Dree tense and crouch. Then each sprang forward in a prodigious leap that carried them at least twice their body length. They landed on limbs like springs and the second leap carried them even farther than their first. They bounded across the flat rock, hardly seeming to touch the surface before they were in the air again.

Kosmir might as well have been standing still for all the good that running did him. The Tyrant eased the volante forward, cruising above and behind the leaping Dree, so that Bandar was an eyewitness to what happened when they caught the man.

One sprang onto the officer's back, sinking the claws of its forelimbs into the muscles of his shoulders while its heavy hind legs, with their great curved claws, shredded the flesh from Kosmir's legs.

The second Dree had leaped neatly over its sibling and its prize, turning in the air so that it landed on its back right in front of Kosmir, its claws raised to receive him. Sandwiched between the two of them, he screamed for a long time before they tore something vital.

"Instinctive behavior," said the Tyrant. "First they hunt, then they feed."

Bandar thought it was talking to itself, then remembered that this archetype always enjoyed seeing its self-worth reflected in the awe of another. "You're right," he said.

Bandar looked down and saw that a ventral slit had opened in the abdomen of each Dree. Their claws were ripping free pieces of Kosmir and cramming them into the openings. Something like teeth flashed as they shredded the raw meat.

"Now they rest," said the Tyrant when the feeding was done. It landed the volante near the Dree, unlocked the prisoners' compartment, and beckoned Bandar out. The noönaut was frightened but the creatures seemed to have become dormant.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Tyrant adjusted the shocker's setting and turned it on the Dree. They toppled over and lay on their backs like dead insects.

"We'll put them in the cargo bay," the Tyrant said.

THEY OVERFLEW VICTOR at rooftop height. Bodies lay in the streets — mostly human, though Bandar saw one Rover. The noönaut was piecing together a picture of what must have happened: the Rovers, with their less complex minds, would have been the first to be mentally enslaved. The Dree would have made them get their hunting weapons and come up from Rovertown at night in a coordinated strike. Victor had no Bureau of Scrutiny detachment; it would have been quickly overrun, its population captured and put under guard.

But how could there be a Dree to enslave anyone? They had been wiped out eons before, traced back to their home world and brutally expunged. Bandar believed he knew how: the Swept was home to extreme gravitational anomalies; gravity was necessary for the formation of noöspheres; was it possible that the Dree equivalent of a collective unconscious had been captured by the aggregator that had crushed the invaders, had been carried intact down to the core of Old Earth and been reflected back in a process that occurred over geological time?

Bandar had to assume it was possible because that was the only way it could have happened. And now the anomaly and its noöspheric cargo had reached the surface and come within range of humans and Rovers.

But how had the lassitude sufferers been transformed into Dree? It appeared that the original invaders had had a secret: they had not bred, as had been assumed, by laying eggs to be tended by enslaved species. So powerful was the Dree hive mind that it could alter the very gene plasm of its captives, with a chemical assist from a particular fungus grown in the hives. The Dree fed its captives truffles of the Swept, then exerted its immense psychic powers against the most intimate constituents of their cells, transforming them into replicas of itself.

Those who did not eat the fungus but came under the spell of the Dree fell into the lassitude. When the transformative crisis arrived, they died. Those who met the crisis with the truffles in their systems became Dree.

But what of Arboghast, the scroot officer? He was neither Dree in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

making nor a mind-slave. But he was unquestionably psychotic, a mind absorbed completely by the Tyrant archetype. That opened an interesting avenue of speculation: would Harkless's possession by the Hero (or Bandar's by the Helper if he gave in to it), protect him from mind slavery, or even from the lassitude? The noönaut automatically began examining the question as if he might begin drafting a paper. Then it struck him that, if the Dree were truly resurgent on an Old Earth that no longer possessed substantial military forces, there would be no one to publish his thoughts, nor any to read them.

The Bureau volante slid down toward the south end of Victor, passed over Rovertown, and alighted on the open promenade deck of the *Orgulon*. A forward hatch gaped, guarded by two Rovers with pulse rifles. Arboghast summoned them to haul Harkless's still unconscious body from the vehicle. The guards responded immediately, and Bandar deduced that the psychotic scroot must be a willing ally of the Dree.

The relationship was not too far-fetched. Typically, all the Tyrant ever wanted was to stand atop a heap of humanity. The greater the heap, the greater the archetype's satisfaction. To Arboghast, the nonhuman Dree would be just another natural force to be worked with to produce the desired end.

The renegade gestured for Bandar to precede them as the Rovers dragged the inert young agent to the hatch. Below the deck began a stairway guarded by two more armed Rovers. Bandar was directed downward to a great open space, one of the landship's cargo holds, where a number of people sat or lay upon the floor. Some wore the uniforms of the *Orgulon*'s crew, others were in sleeping attire and must have been brought here from their homes in Victor.

The guards laid Harkless on his back on a pile of rough sacking on the floor of the hold. Bandar sat beside the young man and examined him, finding his breathing regular and his pulse steady and strong. Physically, the agent was fine, although too strong a dose from a shocker could permanently disrupt neural processes essential to personality and memory.

A man sitting nearby rose and came to take a look at the unconscious young man as Bandar tried gently tapping Harkless's cheek. The noönaut looked up, thought the man's face was familiar, then realized that he had been seeing that saintly visage regularly projected to the passengers on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cruise: Father Olwyn, more commonly known as Horslan Gebbling, fraudster.

"How is he?" the man said.

Harkless's eyes fluttered and opened. "We'll know in a moment," Bandar said.

"He'll be fine," said another voice, and Bandar turned to see that Raina Haj was seated not far away, a grim look in her eyes and a dark bruise on her jaw. "Arboghast was eager to take him alive and aware. It seems they have a history."

The young man was swimming back up into consciousness now. "He's coming to," Gebbling said. "That futterer didn't turn his brain to jelly."

Grunting with pain, Harkless sat up and his hands went first to his bandaged leg. Then he looked about him, registering faces before asking, "Where is Imbry?"

Bandar told him his partner was still up on the Monument. The noönaut watched the young man's eyes as he delivered the news and was sure he saw no evidence there of the Hero. That was not unexpected — shockers grievously overstimulated the body's own electrochemistry, generating a powerful internal surge of electrical current that had the same mind-clearing effect as a shock delivered from an external source. But now, after all his efforts to deliver the young man from the archetype's grasp, Bandar was coming to believe that a Hero was precisely what the situation called for.

"Imbry will die out there," the young man was saying.

"We will all die, in one manner or another," Bandar said. Nothing summoned a Hero like an expression of despair, and the noönaut looked to see if the provocative comment had raised a glimmer behind the agent's eyes, but saw nothing.

"And Kosmir?" the scroot said.

Bandar described the gory end of the prisoner and again sought for the Hero, but again saw no sign of his return.

Harkless's voice was a croak. He asked for water. Bandar had seen people dipping from a barrel not far away. He pointed it out to the young man, leaving him to rise and get his own drink. Pain could help bring up the Hero. Before Harkless took his first limping step toward the barrel, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

noönaut warned him that the Rover guards would shoot without warning. *An imminent threat can also summon the Hero*, he thought.

But when Harkless came to sit with them again, his face remained his own. He watched as two Rovers descended the steps from the deck above, carrying between them a man in a landship uniform whose legs would not support him. They laid the crewman moaning on the deck.

The young agent watched as the Rovers chose a plump female in the attire of a steward and led her away. He stared at the armed guards at the top of the stairs. "Those are not hunting weapons," he said. "They are pulse rifles."

"They came in the 'mining machinery' that the *Orgulon* delivered," Gebbling said. He had also seen heavy weapons and some kind of armor that would convert the gig and Arboghast's volante into fighting vehicles.

"Where do they take the people?" Harkless asked.

"To be tested," Gebbling said. "Only the ones who fail are returned here. Most pass the test and are consigned to the crèches."

"Test? Crèches?" Harkless's face hardened and Bandar saw the first spark of the archetype in his eyes. He fanned it into flame, offering a lurid account of how the Dree transformed their captives into copies of themselves. The threat of losing a sense of identity could always outrage a pure archetype. He watched as the madness rose steadily in the young scroot. Eventually the power of the psychosis would overcome the residual effects of the shocker, and Harkless would become a potent weapon to use against their captors — determined, superbly coordinated in the arts of violence, and completely ruthless.

When he was finished, there was an almost luminous glow to the young man's face. Its youthful features now looked as if carved from old wood. "So some become Dree," Harkless said, "and the rest are slaves?"

"Except for the tiny few who go mad," Bandar told him.

"I would rather die fighting the guards," the Hero said. The transition had been made.

The conversation turned to Arboghast and how, as the scroot pursued Gebbling into a played-out brillion mine that the fraudster was salting with high-grade ore samples, they had both encountered the Dree entity imprisoned within a gravitational cyst. The Dree had easily enslaved Gebbling, but Arboghast's psychosis had armored his mind against its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

power. Instead, they had struck a bargain to spread the lassitude and create a new Dree hive. The forgotten enemy would secretly burrow beneath the population centers of Old Earth, capturing humans and converting them into legions of hive-mates, until they burst onto a defenseless world.

Having sketched this dark vision of despair, Bandar now offered that most powerful stimulus to the Hero: a small ray of hope. He speculated that the only missing step between the Dree and its victory was that the Dree archetype had not yet been able to create enough actual Dree for the hive mind to coalesce.

Harkless had been staring at his feet. His head jerked up and he looked sharply at the noönaut. "It has not coalesced?"

Bandar recalled the feral manner in which the new-made Dree had savaged Kosmir. He said he believed that there was probably a need for a critical mass of Dree brains before their behavior rose above the instinctual and a unified consciousness emerged.

Bandar could see the Hero was strong in Harkless, though the young agent's body remained weak from the effect of the shocker. Still, he would soon be fully restored. The noönaut looked around the cargo hold, counting guards and noting their dispositions. Not too long and the moment would be right for the Helper to outline a desperate plan that the Hero would soon come to think of as its own.

But as he regarded the young man, sitting with his knees drawn up, absently rubbing the spot on his calf where the Dree had punctured the muscle, Bandar felt a pang of misgiving. The young scroot would almost certainly die in the coming violence, and Bandar would be complicit in his death.

Yet, if nothing is done, Bandar thought, *we will all die, one way or another: transmogrified into Dree, worked to death by Dree, or excruciatingly tormented to death for the delectation of Dree. Besides, to die for the good of all is what the Hero Sacrificial is for.* But somehow the voice did not sound like his own. Bandar wondered how much he, himself, was under the spell of the Helper archetype. *Or is that what I am for?* he wondered.

But he put aside these qualms and concentrated on the elements of the immediate situation, while keeping a close eye on the Hero.

The pair of Rovers who had taken away the plump steward now came

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back without her. She had either been sent to the crèches or to toil in the fungus beds, Raina Haj said.

Bandar saw the Hero's resolve deepen further. "When they are taken, how are they tested?" the young man said, and the noönaut could hear a deeper note in his voice.

Gebbling explained that each captive was brought near to the gravitational anomaly where the Dree entity was encapsulated. In moments its mental powers ransacked the mind and decided the prisoner's fate.

"I will fight its power," said the Hero.

Soon, Bandar thought. *Very soon*. He watched as the Rovers reached the bottom of the stairs. The ones who came for the testees carried no weapons that could be seized. But if a strong, highly coordinated Hero were to attack them, they might be battered unconscious — Rovers had thin skulls — then that powerful Hero might pick up one of their inert forms and, using him as a shield against the pulse rifles, rush up the stairs and disarm one of the guards before they could seal the hold.

And once the Hero had a pulse rifle, the balance of power in the confined space would soon shift in his favor.

Bandar looked at the young man, saw residual tremors in his legs and arms. *Very well*, he thought. *A little while longer for him to recover. Then we'll see.*

But the pair of Rovers did not take one of the landship's crew. Their strong fingers, set with thick, dark nails, closed upon the still trembling arms of Baro Harkless. They pulled him to his feet and hauled him to the stairs. The Hero struggled, but the strength was not there. In a few moments, Harkless was dragged protesting through the hatch.

And the Helper was left helpless.

GUTH BANDAR MADE his way to where the great white Wall loomed. He approached it, searching with the corners of his eyes until he found the discoloration that marked where the Dree had broken through eons before. It tended to slip from the gaze when he looked at it directly so he employed an Institute mentalism that let him hold it in focus.

Gingerly, he raised a hand and touched a finger to the faint mark. It was solid, no different from any other stretch of the Wall. Bandar lowered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his hand and considered what he had learned. The Dree of old had broken through into the human Commons, just as humans on Gamza had broken into the Bololo noösphere. Yet the surviving Dree entity had not done so this time. Or at least, not yet. Bandar could only assume that the entity itself, though it had the strength to enslave individual humans and even to break into the Rover Commons and seize them all, was not yet powerful enough to smash its way through the Wall. On Gamza, it had taken a mass of humans concentrating on the same archetypical material to make the Bololos cavort and dance. It must require a critical mass of Dree, unified into a hive-mind, to crash through the Wall. But soon that hive-mind would cohere, and when it did, the Dree would spread with the same virulence that had allowed the original invaders to overrun vast territories, even whole worlds down The Spray.

How this information could help, however, was an answer that eluded him. He was convinced that the situation was now beyond hope. The Rovers had taken away the Hero. Bandar presumed that Arboghast, at his leisure, had had the young scroot brought before him and had simply killed him, probably painfully and with maximum humiliation. It was what Tyrants invariably did with failed Heroes.

Not long after, the Rovers had come for Bandar. They had taken him from the landship, walked him to a nearby mine entrance, then down a series of interconnecting tunnels until a strong gravitational anomaly had pulled him to his knees.

He felt the Dree archetype touch his mind, and sought to defend himself with the three, three, seven thran. But the tones meant nothing to the alien entity. He felt it winnow the contents of his psyche with cold precision, brushing aside his individuality and disdaining the Institute mentalisms he tried to summon against it. He might as well have been the most ignorant loblolly on FirstDay.

In a moment it was over. The Dree did not tell him what fate had been assigned to him, but the Rovers soon made it clear by their actions. He was taken to a deeper part of the mine where row upon row of coffin-sized holes had been bored into the rock. Here he was handed over to humans from Victor, dull-eyed mind slaves in the garb of miners, who efficiently swaddled Bandar from head to toe in a shroud of semitransparent material that tightly bound his limbs to his body. One of them tore a hole in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stuff where it covered the noönaut's nose and mouth, allowing him to take a relieved breath, but the relief was shortlived: two of them tilted him back on his heels, then lifted him and shoved him feet-first into a waist-high hole. A moment later, calloused fingers pressed against his teeth, forced his mouth open so that a feeding tube could be inserted roughly into his gullet. Almost immediately, he felt a pulse of coldness pass down the tube and into his body. *Truffles of the Swept*, he thought, *to speed the transformation.*

Now Bandar's body lay in its crypt-like crèche, alien fungus insinuating its substance into his tissues, while his consciousness wandered the Commons seeking a last desperate hope. But there was nothing he could do at the Wall and he turned away. As he did so, his eye noticed on the ground the long pale scar he had seen before. He remembered what Harkless has said about swimming through the Old Sea to the Rover Commons, how he had freed the dreaming Yaffak.

But Bandar had no means to cut through the floor of the Commons. He deployed his globular map and looked for a route to a Location where magical weapons were an important element of the dynamic. *Might as well get the best*, he thought. Then he dismissed the notion. He knew all too well what happened to noönauts who entered the Old Sea: they lost all volition, hanging helpless and inert in the pearly waters until the great Worm came like ponderous doom to swallow them.

A profound sadness washed over him, a true despair, for there was nothing he could do. This was work for a Hero, but even the Hero had been murdered before it could lift its sword.

A spot in the globe was blinking, yellow alternating with red. The map remembered the last Location its owner had been. It was reminding Bandar of his recent visit with Harkless to the Event that memorialized the hemming of the Dree. There was a quick route to it from where he now stood at the Wall, and Bandar made his way there. Perhaps whatever coincidence had brought him and the young scroot there would give Bandar an idea. If not, he could pass from the Event to one of the nicer Class One Heavens, walk without a thran, and let himself be absorbed into paradise — before the Dree robbed him of his essence.

He arrived in the Location when it was reaching just about the same point in its cycle as when he had left it. The armored assault had passed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by and the aggregator was descending from space, blotting out the stars. Singing the insulating thran, Bandar went down onto the plain and sought the ditch where the Dree weapons crew had died. It was to this spot that the Commons had called Harkless. Perhaps there was something here that would make itself known to Bandar, now that he knew what the young man's strangeness had been all about.

But when he bent, chanting, over the charred Dree corpses, he found no revelation. He pulled at the carbonized chitin, looking for some object that would provide a clue. But there was nothing.

Something hard and cold touched his shoulder. Bandar leapt up, an unintentional shriek taking the place of the thran. He landed crookedly and fell back upon the dead Dree. Above him, against the splash of stars and near-space orbitals, limned by green and orange flashes of weapons fire in the hills above the plain, he saw the outline of a man wearing a winged helmet. The cold, hard thing that had touched his shoulder was a sword of iron.

The Hero bent over him, chanting in Baro Harkless's voice the thran that hid them from the battle.

"What are you doing?" Bandar said.

The Hero gestured at him and Bandar realized he must take over the thran while the other answered: "I have come for you. You are the Helper."

"There is nothing to be done. I am sealed in a crèche being transmogrified into a Dree. They are all taken: Gebbling, Haj, the last of the landship crew. It is too late."

"Yet here you are prodding the Dree dead."

"I had a faint hope there would be something here that would serve us," Bandar said. "I found nothing."

By the light of an explosion out on the plain he saw the expression on the Hero's face: assured, almost amused. *Typical*, he thought.

Harkless was suggesting they go somewhere where they could talk without having to switch the thran back and forth. Bandar consulted his map and sang the tones that opened a nearby gate. They went through into an Earnest/Realistic blizzard. Two steps in the direction his noönaut sense provided and he opened another gate that admitted them to the searing heat of a desert.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The sun above them was yellow, almost white, an early rendering. Sweat sprouted all over Bandar's body. Harkless, though in mail armor and animal pelt, showed no sign of discomfort. Indeed, he wore that characteristic look of excited anticipation that was so essentially the Hero's.

And yet there was something else there. It was impossible for a psychotic to be possessed by two archetypes — they would inevitably clash — yet there was a complexity to the Hero's aspect that Bandar couldn't account for. He even believed he still saw remnants of the strange young man.

"I thought you'd be dead," he said.

"Arboghast taunted me, then sent me to be made into a Dree," the other said, and it seemed to be Harkless who was speaking. "Now I am in a crèche, awaiting transformation."

The noönaut led them to a slope of sand ornamented by wind-scoured bones. "You said you had an idea?" he said.

"Out on the Swept, I entered the Rover Commons and freed Yaffak from his bonds," Harkless said.

"I have come to accept that," Bandar said. "I have even seen the scar in the floor beside the Wall."

"I believe I could return by the same route and free the others. I would enter their dreams, cut the tethers, one by one. They would turn on the Dree and slaughter them before the hive mind consolidates. They could then free those who have been placed in the crèches, including you and me."

It did not seem practical to Bandar. He pointed out that when Yaffak had been freed the Rover had been physically far from where the Dree entity lay imprisoned in its gravitational anomaly. Here, the bonds were surely stronger. "And what of the Rovers that are not asleep and dreaming?"

As he spoke, the noönaut watched for a reaction. This late in its dynamic, a fully engaged Hero would show impatience, even anger, at any attempt by the Helper to divert it from the catharsis. But the figure in front of him maintained a cheerful equanimity.

"I hoped you would show more enthusiasm," the Hero said. "It seems a good plan to me. I got it from the Wise Man, after all."

"The Wise Man?" Bandar said, carefully keeping an even tone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes. The one with the long white beard and the staff."

"And where did you encounter him?"

"At the Wall. Now he speaks within me." The Hero's face turned uncharacteristically thoughtful, and Bandar was fairly sure he was hearing Baro Harkless. The shifting of faces and voices reminded him of something, but when he sought for it, it faded away.

Harkless was saying, "It works best if I don't try to get a direct answer, but his thoughts come into my mind."

"Oh, really?" Bandar said. "And have you heard from any others?"

Harkless pulled at his chin. "The Father, I think. He doesn't speak directly to me, but I sense that he takes an interest. The others just watch."

Bandar rested his forehead on his spread fingertips and addressed the Sincere/Approximate grains of sand on the slope before him. "You have come into close contact with several pure characteristic entities?"

"All of them, I believe. Though some kept their distance."

"And none of them absorbed you?"

"I think the Hero has taken an interest."

Bandar lifted his head and looked at the leather-belted leggings, the helmet and the shaggy paw-crossed pelt. "Taken an interest," he said, as if talking to himself.

"Hmm," said Harkless. "That's how it seems."

Bandar stared out across the lone and level sands. "All of this is, of course, quite impossible," he said after a moment. "Anyone approached by a characteristic entity is absorbed. The archetypical energy is immense, overpowering—a great wind encountering a tiny flame. Poof! And that is that."

"I have not found it so," said Harkless. "Perhaps it has something to do with the presence of the Dree entity, right next door, so to speak."

"Well, of course it has something to do with the Dree!" Bandar snapped. "It has *everything* to do with the Dree! But that's not an explanation for the impossible."

"Nonetheless, the Wise Man is very confident."

"Archetypes," Bandar said, "are always sure of their plans. That is why it is dangerous to listen solely to one of them. Even two can be mutually reinforcing in their madness. A prudent fellow samples a wide range of opinions and creates a consensus."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A prudent fellow would not end up wrapped snugly in a hole in a rock wall, awaiting transformation into a Dree."

"I fail to see your point," Bandar said.

"My point is that even if the Hero and the Wise Man are wrong, their plan is at least an attempt to resist. And even if its chances of success are minimal, they are still greater than if we lie passive in our crèches waiting to be extinguished."

Bandar looked off into the heat haze. "I had formed my own plan. The Dree may inherit my empty shell. I will have fled to Paradise."

He saw a wistful look appear on the young man's face, but it was almost immediately supplanted by the Hero. "I would rather die doing all that I could to defeat the enemy."

"I believe it to be a lost cause," Bandar said.

The Hero Sacrificial solidified in Harkless's eyes. "That is the best kind of cause," he said.

Bandar made it clear that he was not convinced, then grew concerned at the flash of anger that he saw in the Hero's face. An angry Hero within sword's length was an uncomfortable companion, even for a Helper. He decided to evoke the Wise Man. "Perhaps the one with the long beard could convince me," he said.

He saw the shift take place behind the young man's eyes. A cool and level gaze now looked back at him. The voice that came out of Harkless's mouth had a different timbre. "I know what will move you."

"Indeed? What would that be?"

The hand that did not hold a sword gestured to the emptiness around them and the eyes twinkled.

"What? The desert?" Bandar said.

"The Commons."

Well played, thought Bandar, though he said nothing.

The Wise Man said, "You have devoted your life to the noösphere. Though there be only the slightest hope of saving this great and ancient work of humanity, would you not clutch at that hope even over the certainty of Paradise?"

Bandar sighed and rose to his feet. He called up his map and plotted a route back to the Wall. He swore softly under his breath then chanted the thran that opened a gate.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The scar in the ground had faded to a faint scratch. The Hero had dimmed a little in Harkless's face and Bandar saw a trace of fear. He could understand the young man's trepidation. To swim once in the Old Sea and see the Worm coming would be hard enough. To do it twice was more than the noönaut cared to contemplate.

"If we had a rope to tie around one leg, you could pull me back. It would be faster than swimming."

"But we have no rope."

"Can you not bring one from some other part of the Commons?"

Bandar was not sure that an object purloined from a Location could survive in the Old Sea. He now found himself facing a Hero's impatience. "Why don't we find out?"

Bandar examined his map and sang a thran. He passed into a stone chamber where a white-bearded king sat upon a throne and watched as his young queen threw smoldering glances at a muscular young bravo in tunic and sandals, then entered a wasteland of shattered brick and broken glass, where the ground trembled to a violent aftershock. He slid down a pile of masonry, opened another gate, and stepped onto the planked deck of a ship powered by serried banks of oars. The vessel was tilted sharply to one side and Bandar heard the sound of inrushing water. Another galley was backing away, its bronze beak fouled with wreckage. Around him, cursing men in figured breastplates and shining grieves struggled to strip off their armor before sliding and tumbling into the sea. From below decks came screams.

Chanting a thran, Bandar traversed the slanting deck and scooped up a coiled rope. He examined it closely, finding it to be a densely fibered Earnest/Realistic type, as suited such a Class One Event as a Decisive Sea Battle. He slid the coil up his arm and over his shoulder, then made his way back, via a shortcut through a night forest, to where Harkless waited at the Wall.

The Hero was still ascendant. It took the cord and knotted it around one ankle, leaving the rest coiled upon the ground. Then it rose and pressed the sword's point into one end of the scar made by his earlier passage. The ground dimpled, then the sword went through, and the Hero's muscles bunched as it forced the edge along the thin line and then well beyond.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I've made a bigger gap," it said, "since I will surely be longer freeing many than I was freeing one. Try to keep the gap open. It will immediately begin to heal over."

"I will," Bandar said. "I am the Helper."

"Then I go." Bandar saw that the Hero was full in Harkless as it parted the lips of the wound and made a shallow dive into the Old Sea. The slit swallowed the mail-clad body like a lipless mouth. Immediately its edges pressed themselves back together around the rope, but Bandar was relieved to see the cord steadily sliding into the incision; the Hero was willing itself through nothingness toward the Rover Commons.

True to his promise, Bandar knelt and slipped his fingers into the gash to pull it apart and keep it from healing. The effort strained his virtual muscles and he used an Institute mentalism to pour more of his being into his reified hands and arms. The gap appeared again and he found himself looking into the ancient realm of presapience.

No noönaut had gazed upon the Old Sea in time out of mind. Bandar looked down into its seeming waters, suffused by a sourceless glow of pearly light, and marveled at its luminous mystery. Some early explorers had recorded a common reaction to the sight of the Unknowingness, as it was originally known: a strange yearning to sink into its depths, to be shed of the burden of self-awareness and become, as our prehuman ancestors were, one with the nothingness of pure being. Bandar stared into the endless depths and waited to see if there arose in him a desire not to be. After a while, he decided it was a quality he lacked. *Being Bandar these many years has not been an unalloyed joy,* he mused, *but, all taken in all, I would rather have been Bandar than not have been anything.*

His thoughts were interrupted by a flicker of motion at the edge of his vision. He angled his head to look down through the gap at a slant. A tiny creature appeared to undulate slowly toward him. But Bandar knew that it was neither tiny nor slow; it was the great Worm, and it was coming to devour Harkless and return the Old Sea to a population of one.

He watched in mingled fascination and dread as the mindless entity swam toward him. Gradually, it grew in apparent size from the length of the smallest segment on the smallest of Bandar's fingers to the length of the entire digit. From that change, Bandar tried to estimate how long it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would take the Worm to reach the gap. But he abandoned the calculation; he had no idea how long it would take for the Hero to reach the Rover Commons, find and free a dreaming Rover, then repeat the process. And, besides, time was not time in the Commons nor in the Old Sea.

But even if the scheme worked, what use would be a few free Rovers against all their enslaved fellows and all the humans who were by now mind-thralls of the Dree? Bandar sighed and looked again at the Worm. It was the size of his longest finger and growing steadily. He could make out the circular orifice that was its face, opening and closing as it swam, revealing a rim of triangular teeth, flashing white against the blackness of its maw.

The rope had ceased to slide into the gap. Either Harkless had made it to the other side or he hung, helpless in the grip of the gray void, as emptied of all volition as had been its first explorers. After a moment, another length of the cord was jerked through and Bandar decided that the young man had yanked it from the other side of the Wall, creating some slack so that he could hang it coiled on the thorn hedge against his return.

The Worm was closer now, appearing as long as Bandar's hand from wrist to fingertip. Bandar looked up and away from it and was startled, then terrified, to find that he was not alone.

A crowd had gathered in the seeming field that led to the Wall, forming a demilune around a narrow crescent of space at the center of which was Bandar and the gap in the Common floor. The noönaut knew them all: there stood the Magus, behind him the Thing-in-the-Dark, and over there was the Bully and the trio of Maiden, Matron, and Crone, and beyond them the Seer and the Believer, and scores more, the entire throng of usual suspects from the prime arrondisement. Prominent in the center front of the crowd were the Father and the Fool, the Wise Man and the Hero and Helper. This last figure looked at Bandar, cocked its head, and winked.

Trembling, Bandar rose to his feet and sought an avenue of escape, but they surrounded him on every side except the unpassable Wall. Stark fear shook him; he fought to subdue it. But all of his training, since the day Preceptor Huffley had first led him to stand on the bridge and see the characteristic entities, had assured him that to be in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

presence of a pure archetype without the protection of a thran meant certain absorption. Now it was as if he had crossed the bridge to gambol amongst them.

And yet... nothing happened. He remained Bandar, and the thran that had wanted to spring to his lips got no further than the opening of his mouth.

The Wise Man made a small gesture of its gnarled hand and said, "You are in no more danger than we are."

Bandar conquered his fear. "How can this be?" he said.

The answer came suddenly, in a burst of released memory. He remembered all of it, the smith and the mute, being laughed out of the Institute, his uncle's battle with the bull-headed monstrosity, the encounters with the Multifacet, the manipulation that had denied him everything that he had wished his life to be. He saw how they had used him, had even coerced him into reluctantly agreeing to be used. He wondered how much of his life had been bizarrely twisted, that he might fulfill this role he now played. Anger flooded him.

"It had to be a noönaut," the Wise Man said.

"Did it have to be me? Why not Didrick Gabbris?"

"It required an exceptional mind, one that could accept innovation. The Helper must be able to help."

And now they showed him more: the shape of Baro Harkless's life, the death of the boy's father by the conniving of Ardmander Arboghast, the years of obsession with becoming an agent of the Bureau of Scrutiny, a devotion that separated young Harkless from the ordinary run of humankind, walling him off, time and again, from the simple human experiences that ought to have been part of his growing up.

A welter of emotions surged and clashed in Bandar — anger, resentment, pity, even wonder. He looked into the eyes of the Wise Man, then into those of the Hero and Helper, the Father and the others, seeing their terrible simplicity that was at once both essentially human and inhuman, just the raw, rough bricks out of which real people were built.

They had shaped Baro Harkless into a kind of replica of themselves: a simplified facsimile of a human being; an instrument; a tool to do a job. They had shaped Guth Bandar as well, twisting and chopping the substance of his life so that he would answer to the purpose they would put

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him to. Still, the Helper could not be as simple as the Hero; he would have a subtler part to play, so they had left Bandar enough of a life for him to realize what had been done to him.

And enough to know what they intended for Baro Harkless. "You have sent him to die for you," he said. "That is why you fashioned him to be the Hero Sacrificial — not the Conqueror, not the Reluctant Champion, not the Commoner Who Rises. There is no chance that he can free dreaming Rovers and set them on the Dree."

The Wise Man returned his angry stare with equanimity. "He will do as he must, as we did what we must."

"But he is not one of you! He is a real human being, for all that you have edited him into a cripple! He can no more survive in the waking world than a glove can function without a hand."

"This is about survival," said the archetype. "We could not defeat the Dree. We could not do it the first time, we cannot do it now that it returns. It is one where we are many, a fist against fingers."

"But how can Harkless defeat that thing?"

The Wise Man's eyes showed no emotion, had none to show, Bandar realized. "He cannot defeat it," the entity said. "There is only one force that can." The archetype turned its affectless eyes toward the gap in the Commons floor.

Bandar understood. "The Dree entity is like the newly made Dree. If Harkless runs, it will pursue him. And you will have made sure that that stratagem will occur to him."

"It will," said the Wise Man, "for I am part of him."

"So he will lead the Dree back to the gash in the ground on the Rovers' side, and it will follow him into the Old Sea."

"And there the Worm will take it."

"And him," said Bandar.

The Wise Man's gaze was unperturbed. "Perhaps."

The Hero spoke. "Sometimes the one must die to save the many."

And the Father said, "I believe he will not die."

"And if he doesn't," said Bandar, "then what?"

"Then he will live," said the Wise Man.

"Yes, but live as what? He is not fit for this world. He is like one of you, a rough draft who strides about in his simplicity, constantly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

colliding with the disorderliness of real life, always bumping his nose against nuances and contradictions the rest of us easily avoid."

The archetypes regarded him without comprehension, as if he were speaking a language they did not understand. Only the Father looked troubled.

There was nothing to do but wait, and hope. Bandar seated himself on the ground at the base of the slit and took the rope in his hands. The gash was still trying to close, and he put his heels to it, straining with his legs, forcing it open. He looked down and saw the Worm again, larger now, nearer. And swimming mindlessly toward the gap.

A tug on the rope drew a length of it through Bandar's hands and into the Old Sea. Bandar's fists closed on the rough Earnest/Realistic fibers. He leapt to his feet and pulled hard, felt weight.

"He is coming!" he called to the archetypes. "He has made it!"

"Unless," said the Wise Man, "it is the Dree. Do not pull."

Bandar addressed the archetype as no noönaut had ever done, using a phrase he had scarcely ever uttered since his student days. The Wise Man's bushy white eyebrows rose slightly, but it said nothing.

Bandar saw a shadow darken the lip of the incision, then a hand appeared pulling at the rope. Baro Harkless, mailed and helmeted, his sword in its scabbard, hauled himself from the Old Sea. Not a drop of its "waters" clung to him.

Harkless stood on legs that were none too steady. There was a blankness in his gaze, as if the Old Sea had leached some of the life from him. But he drew his sword and took a two-handed grip, raising it above his head, positioning himself over the closing hole.

He did not notice the crowd around them, Bandar saw. Pure archetypes were not aware of each other, and Harkless was now pure Hero.

"Stand clear," it said. "It came after me. I doubt I can kill it, but if I can stop it from coming through the gap, the Worm will take it."

Bandar backed away, giving him room to swing the weapon. "I doubt it, too," he said. "But I would have had the same doubts about your being able to cross from one Commons to another by the Old Sea, yet twice have you done it."

"Take the rope and pull," the Hero said. "Draw it to me."

Bandar did as he was asked, but gave the rope only the slightest tug.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It came freely. He felt no weight, no Dree. Still, again he gave it only the smallest pull.

"Do it again." Bandar heard the Hero rising high, and it called up the Helper in his own being. He did not resist. He gave the rope a strong yank, still felt no resistance. He drew it, hand over hand, and it came freely through the incision, until the end appeared.

He called to the Hero, standing with sword raised above the shrinking gap. "Can you see anything?"

"No. Perhaps the Worm has it."

Or the Old Sea has stolen its will, Bandar thought. *Either way, we are saved.*

Aloud, he said, "Then, right now, the Rovers are turning on your renegade scroot officer. They will hunt him and likely kill him. The miners will be rescuing the captives from the crèches."

The gap in the ground was closing rapidly now. The crowd of archetypes stood silent but made no move to withdraw to their proper place. Bandar wanted to be away from them as swiftly as he could. He took out his globular map and said, "I will plot us a route to one of the Heavens. We can rest there until they come to free us from our niches."

Harkless lowered his sword. The gap in the ground was now almost completely healed. Bandar saw that a node only a few steps away would take them to a benign Landscape from which there were several exits. He opened his mouth to sing the tones that would open the gate.

An astonishing pain tore through the back of his right knee, followed almost instantly by a chill of frigid cold, as if a claw of ice had been thrust into his virtual flesh. Bandar looked down and saw between his legs a gash in the floor of the Commons, wider than the one Harkless had made, ripped by the weapons at the ends of the Dree's forelimbs. Its hooked claw was sunk deep into Bandar.

Now the Dree tore the rent wider, forcing its thorax through from below. It reached up and sank a second talon into Bandar's thigh muscle and this time the noönaut screamed as it hooked itself into him to haul itself free of the Old Sea. It dug its scimitar-clawed feet into the floor of the human noösphere and lifted Bandar clear of the ground, then flung him at the Wall.

He struck with an impact that shook his virtual body and fell to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ground, stunned. His globular map, shaken from his grip at the first stab of pain, had rolled free. He saw the Dree notice the motion, its tendrils questing, then it scooped up the object, raised it to the eyeless face, and Bandar sensed an emotion radiating from the entity, a wave of cruel satisfaction.

He attempted to rise, but his torn legs would not respond. He looked toward the throng of archetypes and saw that they were all looking to the Dree. Then, as one, their eyes turned toward Harkless.

The young man was thoroughly in the grip of the Hero. He shouted defiance at the invader, rushing forward and swinging the iron sword in a lateral arc that knocked the map from its grip. The Dree reared back, its thoracic orifice opening and closing to emit a sound like fire in dry tinder. Then it joined the digits of one forelimb into a dirk-like talon, straight and pointed, and shot it toward Harkless's belly in a blur of speed.

The man backswung the blade, striking the claw and diverting it from his virtual flesh. But just barely, and Bandar could see that the clash of metal against chitin had sent a shock through Harkless. Still, the Hero blazed in the young man's eyes as he shifted his weight to his back foot, then lunged with the weapon's point against the Dree's eyeless head.

The invader batted the thrust away with an ease that bespoke contempt.

Harkless spoke aloud, in his own voice. "How do I defeat this?"

Bandar thought he was being asked, but then he realized that the answer had come from within Harkless's being, where the Hero and the Fool and the Wise Man had made spaces for themselves. A shifting array of emotions crossed the man's face and Bandar knew that Harkless was seeing the shape of his life, the forces that had molded him to bring him to this moment.

Now all was clear to him, and Harkless said, "So I am not the Hero. Rather, I am the Fool."

He stood, listening to an answer that only he could hear, then said, "Why have you brought me to my destruction?"

The Dree had cocked its head and was regarding him. Bandar wondered if it eavesdropped on whatever conversation was going on between Harkless and the Multifacet. The noönaut had no doubt that all of the archetypes had cohered again for this moment, though to his eyes they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remained a crowd. *They're not talking to me this time,* he thought. *I've played my part.*

The Dree was growing larger, was now half again the size it had been when it came through the floor of the noösphere. *There must be enough new Dree for the hive mind to emerge,* Bandar thought. *We are defeated.*

Harkless seemed lost in thought, but Bandar could imagine the colloquy that was going on between him and the Multifacet. The chosen one was being shown the true and final shape of things.

The Dree entity shook itself. Its digits clicked into curved claws and it moved toward Harkless.

"It will kill me," Harkless said. He looked at the sword that had done no harm to the enemy, but there was no fear in his face. The Hero had him now.

Again, the noönaut struggled to rise. He knew it was because the Helper was reaching into him, willing him to aid the Hero in this last sacrifice. But he did not resist.

The Dree came at Harkless, jabbing a claw at his face. He warded it off with the sword, but Bandar saw again that contact with the thing's icy power sent a shock though him. The arm that held the sword drooped, the weapon perilously loose in his failing grip.

"I cannot kill it," he said.

Bandar saw him receive the message, knew that the voice in Harkless's mind was telling him that this had never been about his killing the Dree — though it was surely about dying.

And it was about choosing.

"It is about sacrifice," Harkless said. "And willingness."

The Dree was fashioning a thrusting claw again, a poniard to pierce the Hero's chest. Harkless watched it, but his attention was focused within. Bandar saw him make the decision, offer the final acceptance.

"So it appears I am to be the Hero," Harkless said. "Just not the kind of Hero I thought I was." He turned his eyes for a moment to Bandar. "Look after my Helper," he said. "He did not ask for this."

He said something else, but Bandar could not hear it over the clicking of the Dree's claws against the ground as it set itself and sprang.

But the Hero did not raise his sword. Instead, Harkless thrust out his chest and stepped forward. The Dree's claw tore into his side to lance up

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and inward. Bandar saw pain blossom in the young man's face, followed by a shiver as the agony turned to an icy chill. For a moment he saw despair.

Then, with a shout, Harkless clamped his free arm around the Dree's neck, lifting his feet from the ground so that his full weight hung from its upper body. Now he wrapped his legs around it and the Dree was forced to bend toward the ground. Harkless swung with his sword hand, slashing again and again at the earth where the Dree had broken through. The light of the Old Sea glowed on the iron blade.

The Dree reacted, attempting to straighten. One forelimb was stuck in Harkless's virtual flesh, but it reached now to sink the other's claw into his back and rip him free. It gave off a rank odor that Bandar realized was the reek of fear.

Bandar saw the shape of the plan, and knew that the Helper must help. His legs still would not function but he dragged himself forward until he was beneath the Dree's feet. He sank his hands into the gap that the Hero's sword had torn and stretched it wider.

He looked up and saw the tip of the thing's claw touch Harkless's spine but at that moment the sword that had torn the ground sliced into the lowermost joint of one of the Dree's hind legs. The chitin was thinnest there. The green armor parted, spilling a yellow ichor, and the Dree emitted a hiss. Its stench became overpowering.

Harkless cut again, into the other leg. The Dree twisted, trying to throw him clear, but he held on. The thing's legs buckled and it pitched forward. Together, invader and Hero tumbled through the rent in the ground and into the Old Sea.

Bandar saw them sink. But the endless eerie gray luminescence of the realm below no longer dominated his view: instead, he saw the mindless Worm, its great lightless circle of a mouth as vast as a dark planet. Harkless and the Dree, the Hero still embracing the monster, were falling into the blackness that rose to engulf them.

Then the Dree gave a mighty spasm of its entire form, yanking its imprisoned claw free of Harkless's body. It kicked its hind legs and pushed with its forelimbs against the substance of the Old Sea, struggling to rise again to the gap where Bandar watched.

But as it pulled free of Harkless, the young man reached up after it. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grasped its legs. The cruel spikes that protruded from its limbs pierced his palms, but he held on, and Bandar saw the immense will in him not to let the creature win free and return to the Commons.

Then the Worm took them both. Bandar watched them sink into its cavernous mouth, the Dree still struggling to pull free of Harkless's grasp. The huge triangular teeth closed upon the Dree where abdomen met thorax and sliced it into two pieces. The mouth opened again to let the dead thing fall into its maw. Bandar saw Harkless free his hands of the creature's remnants then, its task completed, he saw the Hero leave the young man's face. Now there was only Baro Harkless, sinking forever into oblivion, wearing a look of hope mingled with apprehension.

"No!" The cry came from somewhere deep in Bandar. He looked up at the crowd of archetypes. Their faces were filling again with the monomanias that formed their intrinsic natures. They were drifting away. One of them — the Healer, he realized — had paused near him. The figure absently waved a hand and at once the pain in Bandar's legs was gone.

"That is not enough!" Bandar rose to his knees and called to the Wise Man who, with the Father, the Fool and the Hero and his Helper, were among the last to turn away. The graybeard turned toward him and for a moment Bandar quailed at what he saw in those wrinkle-framed eyes, but he rallied and said, "It is not right to leave him there! Not after he did all that you required of him!"

"It was what he was for," said the Wise Man. "Now it is done."

"You know it is not right!"

The Wise Man turned away. Yet the other three hesitated. But there was no time to argue and convince. Bandar seized the rope, and tossed one end of it to the Helper, saying, "You're the Helper. So help."

Then he tied the other end to his ankle, and without looking to see what the archetype had done, and before his fear could stop him, he dove through the gap and went down into the Old Sea.

And into the mouth of the Worm.

It had risen almost to the roof of its world and now was sinking back down, its huge mouth still open but beginning to close. Bandar plunged straight into the darkness, then began to stroke with his arms like a diver in a pool. He passed the pieces of the Dree, saw that they were already half

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dissolved, then kept his eyes fixed on the grayish outline of Baro Harkless far down in the dimness of the Worm's gullet. The light was fading as the Worm's mouth slowly closed.

Bandar doubted that moving his arms could help; indeed, he was surprised he could move at all. *It is an expression of will,* he concluded. *I do not accept this outcome and will make it different.* It occurred to him that he had the seeds of a seminal paper for the Institute. Then he countered that thought with the consideration that his chances of preparing and presenting any paper, ever again, were highly dubious.

Harkless was closer now. Bandar could make out the young man's face. The Hero had left him. Instead, Bandar saw behind the young man's features the face of Baro as a young boy, full of innocence and simplicity. Then the man sank farther into the darkness.

Bandar dug with his hands and arms against the substance of what was supposed to be nothingness. *Within the Worm, there is more than the void of the Old Sea,* he thought, feeling *something* resisting his motions and thus letting them propel himself deeper. *There's another great paper,* he thought. He stretched out his arms for another double stroke and his palms smacked into something solid. A moment later, two strong hands seized his wrists.

I have him! he thought. *Now, does anyone have me?*

Then the rope jerked his ankle and together they rose toward the rent in the floor of the noösphere. The Worm was assisting by sinking back into the Old Sea. But when Bandar looked over his shoulder he saw the huge wedges of its teeth approaching each other, like gears about to mesh. He closed his eyes and willed that he and Harkless should rise faster, then opened them to see the serrated edge of one great pale triangle pass by him with barely a handsbreadth to spare. Then he was out of the mouth, with Harkless coming after him. Bandar gripped the animal pelt that the young man still wore and yanked Harkless toward him, pulling him free of the mouth just as the teeth came together. Moments later they were hauled through the rip and back into the Commons.

The red lips of the gash closed rapidly. Bandar and Harkless lay for a moment on the warm fleshy floor of the noösphere. Then the noönaut rolled over and sat up to untie the rope from his ankle. Not far away he saw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Father, the Fool, the Hero, and the Helper, lined up one behind the next, the cord still in their hands. They regarded him with understanding, but already he could see the blankness creeping back into their eyes.

He threw off the rope and shook Harkless. The young man turned to him a face that was still suffused with the acceptance of his own death. Bandar shook him again and said, "We must depart. They are reverting to their true natures."

The noönaut sang the three, three, and seven thran and was gratified to hear Harkless chime in. The archetypes lost their perception of them and turned away, letting fall the rope. Last to go was the Helper, who cast a look back over his shoulder in the direction of Bandar and dropped one eyelid.

Bandar shuddered. Then he looked about and saw his map lying against the wall. He used a mentalism to summon it back to his hand then sang open a gate.

But Harkless held back, gesturing to the departing archetypes. Now that the Hero was fled from him, he could see them. "How did you get them to aid you?" he said.

"I called on them and they helped."

"Were you not afraid one of them would absorb you?"

"They were not here for me," Bandar said. "They were here for you."

They passed through a series of Locations until they came back to the Landscape of the Prairie. Bandar had not been back here since the episode with the pigs. He was glad to see that no trace of those events remained. He led Harkless over a roll of ground that sheltered them from the constant wind and they sat together.

"We should go back to our bodies," the young man said. "I will arrest Ardmander Arboghast, if he lives."

Bandar peered at him. "Is that a vestige of the Hero I hear?"

But the eyes that looked back at him held none of the archetype's elementary madness. "No," Harkless said, "all that died in the Worm. You are hearing a man who wishes to bring to justice the killer of his father."

"We will not lose much time here," Bandar said. "And first I have to tell you a story."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I have had enough of stories. I wonder if I have had only stories, all these years, and never a real life."

"That is what this story is about," the noönaut said. "It began a long, long time ago, when I was a student..."

BANDAR REENTERED waking life to find that he was in a ward of the Victor infirmary and that Baro Harkless was engaged in an argument with Raina Haj. The young agent had risen from his bed and was determined to go after Arboghast, who had escaped when the Rovers had begun killing the Dree. She insisted that he must remain in Victor to testify at a Bureau of Scrutiny inquiry that was soon to convene. A bandaged Luff Imbry, rescued from the Monument, reposed on one of the beds, eating fruit and taking his partner's side.

The argument had reached the point where Harkless had resigned from the scroots and Haj had drawn her shocker to prevent his leaving. Now Bandar intervened.

"Let me offer a proposal," he said.

Not long after, he and Harkless stood on the road that led into the Commons, watching the motes of light that were dreamers flitting past them. Bandar was gratified to see that the young man now manifested in his own guise, without the trappings of a dawn-time Hero.

"So you will not be a scroot," Bandar said. "What will you do?"

"Study under you and become a noönaut," the young man said.

Bandar had been considering the same prospect. In some way his life was still bound to that of Baro Harkless, but he was not sure he wholly welcomed the connection. The young man remained almost as dangerously simple as an archetype, and when seized by determination he was no less terrifying than he had been when they had stood on the bridge overlooking the prime arrondisement. At the same time, Harkless had opened doors that led to great shining territories of new research.

I am a trained noönaut with an unparalleled experience of the Commons, he told himself. *He is a young man with unheard of abilities. I could spend years just delineating his capacities. It is not unthinkable that the two of us could found a new Institute that would soon rival....*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He realized that Harkless was expecting an answer. "We may be able to work something out," Bandar told him.

The young man started to speak but then something caught his attention and he pointed back down the road. "He is here," he said.

Bandar approached the mote of light Harkless was following with his finger. He exerted a mentalism while chanting a complicated thran. A faint image of Ardmander Arboghast wavered before them, snatched from his dream, puzzlement vying in his face with fear. Bandar had the young man lay tight hold of the renegade scroot, while he employed the technique that drew more of the prisoner's being into the Commons, leaving only enough of him in the waking world to sustain minimal existence. It was a tense struggle — the Tyrant was strong in Arboghast — but Harkless's will was also unnaturally powerful and the issue was soon decided.

Bandar led them to a nearby gate. They stepped through into a Heaven that was familiar to the noönaut. He wondered if its cycle had renewed itself since last he was here, or whether one Principal was still laughing over the look of surprise on the Other's face.

Bandar sang the insulating thran loudly so that Harkless could conduct a conversation with his prisoner. He did not hear what was said, but gathered from Arboghast's increasing look of terror and dismay that the discussion was not going well from the Tyrant's point of view.

They marched across the lush grass, the prisoner squirming in Harkless's adamantine grasp, then descended a short slope that ended at the Abyss. Bandar, still singing, looked down and saw the great flat-topped tower just below and to one side, with black-armored demons swarming up ladders to battle a formation of angelic defenders. He motioned to Harkless to move along the edge away from the assault point and they came to a quiet sector. The only movement was that of a giant leather-winged demon, wheeling and gliding back and forth below them in intersecting double loops.

Harkless said something to Arboghast and now the Tyrant struggled in earnest. But the dynamic of this moment had been established long ago. The young man flung his father's killer out into the emptiness. The demon saw the plummeting man and indolently flapped its wings to bring itself under his descent.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It caught Arboghast with talons that pierced his virtual flesh then turned and dropped toward the smoking black pit below. Bandar heard its captive's screams dwindle to the faintest whine.

Harkless stood and watched until the thing was out of sight. Then Bandar put a hand on his shoulder. The man turned and Bandar saw on the young face an expression that had no name. "Now what do I do?" he said.

"Wait here," Bandar said. "You may play with the three maidens if you wish, but you should know that they are not equipped for anything but the most innocent of sport."

The blonde, brunette, and redhead were splashing in the shallow surf, casting coquettish glances their way. Harkless stared at them in a manner that caused Bandar to think that his companion was as inexperienced as the three idiomats.

"Are you leaving me here?" Harkless asked.

"Only for a short time." Bandar approached the Sincere/Approximate jungle beneath the palm trees that fringed the tropical beach. He used his Institute-trained memory to lead him to a spot, then stopped. He was reasonably sure that he had come the correct distance in the right direction. Now he exercised the noönaut's sense that could detect the presence of an inter-Locational node, and felt a tingle on his left side. He turned that way, inching forward until the sensation became so strong as to be unmistakable.

He opened his mouth and sang the most common gate-opening thran. No fissure appeared in the air, nor did he feel the quality that noönauts called "resonancy." He chanted the next most common sequence of tones and again nothing happened. He continued to work his way down the thran ladder, chanting more than two score sequences, before he established that none of the gate-openers worked. But two of them had returned a resonancy: the five, eight, and two had produced a weak response, while the five, four, and six had won him a strong return.

From there it was a matter of trying all the possible combinations, which would have been a mathematically immense number except that Bandar was guided by the resonancy that increased the closer he came to the right sequence. In less than an hour, he chanted five ascending tones,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

followed by three descenders and completed by the same two notes an octave apart. The air rippled.

Bandar paused a moment to mark the occasion. For the first time in millennia upon millennia, an explorer of the Commons had found a new gate. To demonstrate this achievement to the scholars of the Institute for Historical Inquiry would be like...but his mind could not achieve an appropriate equivalent. He put the thought aside and stepped through.

He found no mist, and hadn't expected to. The fog that had shrouded the Multifacet would have been merely for effect. He stood in a lighted space that seemed to have no limit, though there would be walls somewhere, probably of the same colorless substance as the floor beneath Bandar's feet. The place was neither hot nor cold, but warm enough for comfort, the light neither too bright nor too dim. The air was wholesome but carried no draft or breeze.

Bandar deployed his globular map. *And now we'll see,* he thought. He directed at the display the mentalism that would cause his present Location to show itself. A moment later, a new spot came into being within the matrix of lines and colored shapes: a white circle, connected only to the beach where the three nymphets frolicked.

Bandar put away the globe and surveyed the emptiness around him. This place had no dynamic. Nothing he did here could cause disharmony. He decided to try an experiment. He removed a garment and laid it on the floor, one finger still touching it to retain a connection. Then he concentrated and exerted a mentalism, holding in his mind an image of the red-cushioned, ornately carved seat of black wood on which the First Overdean sat during formal dinners in the Institute's refectory. After a moment, the air before him wavered, the garment faded and the chair appeared. Bandar sat upon it, finding it less comfortable than he had expected.

It will take time to build it all, he told himself, then came another thought: *unless Harkless's exceptional talents extend in that direction too.*

He reopened the gate and returned to the beach. The young man was high-stepping through the surf, giving the redhead a piggyback ride while the blonde and brunette chased them both. They were all laughing.

"Baro!" Bandar called. "Come away. I want to show you something."

The young man let the girl slide from his back. "I'll be right back," he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said when she pouted. He followed Bandar off the beach and into the jungle.

Bandar called up the node and they passed through. "You wanted to show me a chair?" Harkless said.

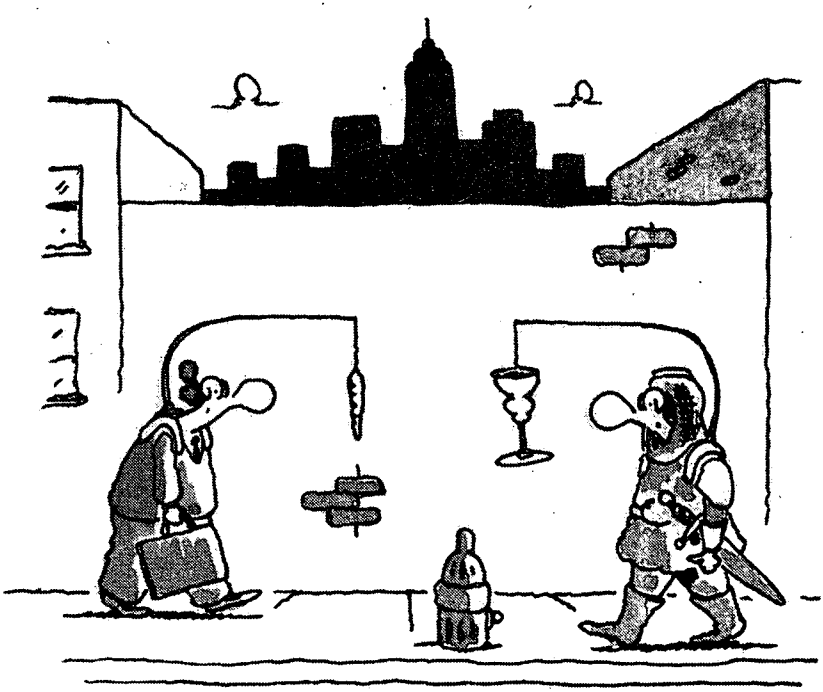
"No," said Bandar, "I wanted to show you the Bandar-Harkless Institute for Noöspheric Innovation."

"Where is it?"

"Well," Bandar said, "I'd like you to sit in the chair. Now close your eyes and think about a very large, well-appointed building, with spacious rooms, quiet cloisters, a good library. Oh, and an excellent wine cellar."

Harkless sat and closed his eyes. "All right," he said, "I'm thinking of it. Now what?"

Bandar looked about him. "Oh, my," he said.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE MAGIC OF LOST LOVES AND CRUSHED CANARIES

WE LIVE IN a time when deception and illusion are everywhere. Dad touches up the family digital snapshots; Junior downloads his on-demand/for-a-fee term paper; Sis uses FX software to lighten her hair and increase her cup size and then posts her latest autobiographical video to YouTube; and Mom gets herself a "LifeStyle Lift" on her morning off.

Then there are the politicians, whose marketing consultants have taken "spin" and double-speak to unimagined new heights. (Give a legislative product a spiffy new slogan-friendly name—like "No Child Left Behind" or "Clear Skies Initiative" and no one will notice if it's actually going to do the opposite of what the name indicates.)

Forget about sleight of hand. We have sleight of everything. And although human trickery is certainly not a twenty-first-century invention, the cumulative effect in recent years has left us almost numb to the barrage of artifice and illusion (not to mention delusion) in modern life. But being a sucker every minute makes us wary, too. It is hard for any of us to give ourselves over to "magic" wholly. We want to be the one who can spot every scam. We want to be above the manipulation. We want to deconstruct the fantasy.

It's crazy somehow that one of the most popular magician acts of the day is a duo, Penn and Teller, who expose the secrets of half of their own stunts. They deconstruct on the spot. And they have a cable show, *Bullshit*, which is dedicated to debunking all manner of modern real-life deceptions from past-life regressions to the pure deliciousness of bottled water.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I applaud their showmanship and their pro-science truth telling. And yet, I can't help but think that what they're offering us is some sort of strange postmodern anti-entertainment. It may be the perfect diversion for a generation of cynical dupes, but is it really open-hearted fun? Sadly, I think not.

Once upon a time, of course, audiences were a tad less cynical about prestidigitation. Oh, they knew that the stage magician's art consisted of trickery. And in the back of their heads they were saying "How'd he *do* that?" But in those days, suspension of disbelief was a bit easier to pull off. At the very least, the crowds who thronged to see the great conjurers of their day took great delight in being "fooled."

It is no wonder, then, that two recent and relatively successful films about stage magicians are both from another time and place, namely *fin de siècle* Europe. They both tell a good old-fashioned story. And it might be argued that both, as the trite phrase goes, "hearken back to a simpler time" when audiences still wondered whether sleight of hand and genuine sorcery might co-exist in the stage wizardry of entertainers who weren't afraid to put the word "Great" in front of their names.

The first of the two released is the better film, by far. And despite the fact that it had no first-tier stars, nor any major studio behind it, and had only a smallish budget for production and promotion, the movie showed the kind of box-office legs that indicate strong word-of-mouth support from viewers. Which just goes to show that movie audiences are smarter than they are generally given credit for.

That film is *The Illusionist*, which was written and directed by Neil Burger *(Interview with the Assassin)*, from a short story by Steven Millhauser. "Eisenheim the Illusionist," which appeared in Millhauser's 1990 collection, *The Barnum Museum*, is a well-crafted tale of a Slovakian magician who comes to great stage power in turn-of-the-century Vienna. The story is mysterious yet surprisingly spare and direct. Burger, in adapting it, felt the need to elaborate upon the short story a good deal. No surprise there.

What did shock and awe me is that Mr. Burger managed to embellish the original narrative without ruining it! He does this by injecting a love story into the mix, believe it or not. And although love-triangle embellishments are usually a kiss of death for a movie, in this case, it actually does enhance the plot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In Burger's version, young Eisenheim (Aaron Johnson), a cabinet-maker's son, is torn from his first love, a pubescent noblewoman named Sophie (Eleanor Tomlinson). He then runs away and travels the globe studying the magical arts and the performance thereof. When he returns to Vienna, it is as a conjurer (Edward Norton) of considerable skill and renown.

Eisenheim's tricks appear to be much more than mechanical misdirection. They seem to be tapping into some secret realm, where orange trees fast-forward to fruition under a master's prodding, and where vaporous doubles and ghostly materializations appear long enough to transfix an audience.

As Eisenheim's fame widens, he prompts at first the curiosity of the waning Hapsburg court, and later the enmity of Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), who quickly realizes that Eisenheim not only holds the nobility in contempt, but is also the rival for the affection of Leopold's noble sweetheart. For the Prince's lady love is none other than Eisenheim's long-lost childhood inamorata, Sophie von Teschen (now, the curvaceous Jessica Biel).

It all sounds rather sappy and quaint, but works surprisingly well. After all, romantic drama elements tend to complement the Late Victorian setting and story. (Though they would have been nigh on impossible to pull off in a present-day plotline.) And while the amorous conflict gets a bit overwrought eventually, who's to say that the passionate entanglements aren't all part of a greater illusion?

Things are not as they seem on a magician's stage. Neither are the relations between our three leads exactly as they might appear. And one must add to the mix an astute police chief inspector named Uhl (played by character actor extraordinaire, Paul Giamatti), who is torn between the politics of his court-sponsored position and his obvious admiration for Eisenheim's considerable trickster talents.

The performances here are all terrific. Norton in particular has the kind of intensity that is pitch-perfect for a character who appears to summon the dead to a public stage. This guy may be a true sorcerer, and Norton's furrowed brow and brooding eyes lend credence to likelihood. The real revelation is how well the actor pulls off the romantic lead aspect of his role, however. Edward Norton is a forceful and intelligent actor, but he has never struck me as matinee idol material. He still doesn't. But he *is*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an actor who can convince you that he loves deeply and passionately — and that's all it takes to sell a movie romance.

The Illusionist is certainly a throwback movie. The plot will remind you of something from the golden days of Hollywood. And the movie's visual presence — shot, of course, in color — is also gorgeously vintage. Filmed in Prague, the locales look impressive. But the color palette and photographic techniques used by Burger and Director of Photography Dick Pope are even more of a knockout.

Like the magicians of yore, *The Illusionist* knows that its first job is to entertain. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the other turn-of-the-twentieth-century magician's drama of this past fall, *The Prestige*.

Director Christopher Nolan and his writing partner and brother, Jonathan, admittedly took on a much more daunting undertaking. They needed to adapt Christopher Priest's award-winning and very involved 400-page novel into a standard feature-length movie. (They didn't make it, by the way. The film clocks in at over two hours — and feels painfully overlong at times.)

Nevertheless, they clearly tried to streamline Priest's epic of two rival magicians whose competition and antagonism knows no bounds. And many of the brothers' edits make perfect sense. First, they jettisoned the modern day framing device. (No loss there.) They also simplified the rather complicated domestic and romantic lives of the two protagonists. The only expunged subplot I missed was the one involving spiritualism, because I think it really said something about the two men and the way they each viewed a magician's art (versus out-and-out charlatanism).

My real issue with the movie comes from the conceit the director and writers use. It is obvious that they see their own film as a magic act, consisting of (as the movie's repetitious voiceover makes clear) a trick's three acts: the pledge, the turn, and the prestige. However, because the brothers are so thrilled by their own cleverness, they become more concerned with toying with their puzzle (and the audience trying to figure it out) than in telling a cogent and involving story.

The characters in the movie therefore seem more like puppets than real human beings, even though both leads — Hugh Jackman as the aristocratic rebel, Angier, and Christian Bale as the craft-obsessed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cockney Borden — really seem to be giving their performances their all.

The fact is that neither man can garner much sympathy, even when an early tragedy involving Angier's wife causes the two apprentice pals to become enemies. And as they start sabotaging and attacking one another, again and again, on and off the stage, the film gets darker, but the two men become even less interesting (except, of course, as the parts of a rather elaborate brainteaser).

The women in the men's lives (played by Piper Perabo, Rebecca Hall, and the way-overexposed Scarlett Johansson) also come off more as plot devices and puzzle clues than as real flesh-and-blood females.

Only Michael Caine, as the wise old magical device "ingénieur," Cutter, displays (as he always does) the kind of easy charm and sage presence that strikes just the right natural note. A worried mentor to both younger men, he alone seems both believable and sympathetic.

In the end, the Nolans get lost in their own devices and end up with an ever more confusing and incomprehensible final act. Those who have read the Priest novel, and who were paying very close attention, might understand the significance of the science-fictional device built by the great engineering genius, Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) and they may therefore fathom the full significance of the final house-of-horrors confrontation between "Angier" and "Borden." But having seen the movie with those who had neither read the book nor taken elaborate notes in the dark, I can testify that some people leave *The Prestige* completely confused about what the heck the movie was even about.

I know that some people went to see Christopher Nolan's breakthrough indie hit, *Memento* (2000), numerous times, just so they could figure out what the backwards plot was actually saying. But you shouldn't need to do the same thing to make sense of a story like *The Prestige*.

Perhaps I shouldn't be so unforgiving toward the Nolans. Their task was not an easy one. And even if they made a movie that ended up a little too much like *Memento* meets *Batman Begins* by way of Charles Dickens, at least they tried to make a film that challenged their audience to actually *think* about what they were seeing. That doesn't happen very often with a major motion picture these days.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Still, *The Prestige* does not impress as a magic act. It is an elaborate contraption that leaves the viewer confounded and confused, but never feeling particularly entertained or delighted by the performance. There is showmanship in the film, but it is the kind that is arrogant and self-involved; and sometimes repellent, to boot. (I could have happily lived my entire life without knowing — or seeing — that the disappearing canary is actually crushed by the magician's collapsing cage.)

The conjurer is supposed to draw their audience into a shared sense of wonder. The Nolans never do this. To my mind, they don't even try.

The legerdemain of *The Illusionist* is done with more finesse. At the end of the film, Chief Inspector Uhl realizes that he has been seriously duped but cannot help but be elated by Eisenheim's artistry. The movie's audience will likely feel the same.

It is that feeling of elation that makes it magic.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT www.fsfmag.com

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ms. Rickert's last contribution to our pages (in our December issue) left several readers wondering just who was the Christmas Witch. Her new tale might also raise a question or two about identity. But isn't that one of the things a memoir ought to do?

Memoir of a Deer Woman

By M. Rickert

HER HUSBAND COMES HOME, stamps the snow from his shoes, kisses her, and asks how her day was.

"Our time together is short," she says.

"What are you talking about?"

"I found a deer by the side of the road. It was stuck under the broken fence. Hit by a car. I called the rescue place but when the animal rescue man saw it, he said it had to be shot. The policeman shot it."

He looks through the mail while she stands there, crying. When he realizes this, he hugs her. Already she feels the hard shapes forming at the top of her head. Later, she will tell him she has a headache.

He will hold her anyway. He will sleep with his mouth pressed against her neck. She will think of the noise the deer made, that horrible braying.

At midnight she wakes up. The sky is exploding with distant fireworks. From past experience she knows that if they stand and strain their necks, they can just barely see the veins of color over the treetops. It is mostly futile, and tonight neither of them rises. "Happy New Year," he whispers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What do you think animals feel?" she says.

He mumbles something about Wally, their dog, who sleeps soundly at the foot of their bed.

"That deer was frightened. Today, I mean. It made the most horrible noise; did I tell you that? I never heard such a noise before. It was really mournful and horrible."

The fireworks end in a flourish of tiny explosions. She knows what she should have done. She should not have waited for the policeman, who took four shots before he killed it. She knew that deer was dying, why did she pretend otherwise? She should have smothered it and put it out of its misery.

NEW YEAR'S MORNING is cold and crisp. Wally wakes them up with his big wet tongue. Her husband takes him out to do his business. When they come back inside, she listens to the pleasant sounds of her husband talking in soft cooing words to Wally, his food dish being filled. Her husband comes back into the bedroom alone, carefully shutting the door behind him. She knows what that means. He crawls in beside her. He rubs his hands up and down her body. "Happy New Year," he says. She sinks into his desires until they become her own. Who knows how long they have? Maybe this is the last time. Later, he fries maple sausage and scrambles eggs, but she finds she cannot eat. He asks her if she feels all right. She shrugs. "My head hurts," she says. "Also my hands." He tells her to go to the doctor. She nods. Well, of course. But she does not tell him that she already knows what is happening.

She takes down the ornaments, wraps them in tissue paper, circles the tree, removing the lights. The branches brush her cheeks and lips and she nibbles on the bitter green. Her husband is outside, splitting kindling. For a while she stands at the window and watches. Wally lies on his bed in the living room. He does not like the loud noise of the axe. She raises her face to the ceiling. She feels trapped and the feeling rises inside her like bile. She brays. Wally slinks past her, into the kitchen. She brays again. It is both deeply disturbing and a relief.

When her husband comes in, carrying kindling, he'll ask her if she's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all right. He'll say he thought he heard a strange noise. She'll shrug and say that she thought the tree was falling. He'll accept this as reasonable, forgetting that she is not the sort to scream at falling Christmas trees, forgetting that when they met she was at least partly wild. He drops the kindling into the box next to the wood-burning stove. "Come here, help me with the tree," she says. He holds the tree while she unscrews the stand. Dry sap snakes from the holes, she cannot help but think of it as blood.

They dump the tree in the forest behind the house. There is a whole graveyard of Christmas trees there. They walk back to the house together, crunching across the snow. A green truck is parked in the driveway. "I wonder who that is," he says. A tall man wearing camouflage clothes and a Crocodile Dundee hat steps out of the driver's side. He nods as they approach.

She knows just what her mother would have said about all of this. She would have said, "You are never going to be tame. You will regret trying. You will hurt others if you deny yourself."

"Hope I'm not disturbing you. I've got an owl that needs to be released. It was found not too far down the road. You know the Paterlys? They're in Florida now. I thought I could release it in your yard. You could keep an eye on it."

"This is Kevin," she tells her husband. "He came to help with the deer yesterday."

Her husband stares at her blankly.

"You know, the one I found? That had to be shot?"

"Can't believe that guy couldn't shoot between the eyes," Kevin says, shaking his head.

"Oh. Right," says her husband.

"Where's the owl?"

"I was just passing by. I'll come back tonight. If that's all right?"

"Tonight?" her husband says.

She tells Kevin that it would be great if he came back later, with the owl. He doesn't look at either of them. He nods at the snow, gets into the truck. They watch him back out of the driveway.

"He's kind of strange," her husband says.

She shrugs. Her bones ache, her head, her hands and her feet, and it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

takes a lot of effort for her to understand that her husband is not being mean, just human. They walk back to the house, holding hands. Who knows, she thinks, maybe this is the last time. Already by nightfall she is wearing mittens. She tells him her hands are cold. Again he tells her to go to the doctor. She tells him that she has an appointment the next morning. This is love, she reminds herself. She smiles at her husband while he turns the pages of his book.

"Stage three," the doctor says.

"There must be some mistake."

"You can get a second opinion."

"What are my options?"

"I say we hit this with everything we've got."

"Are you sure that's my report?"

"I know this comes as a shock, but I recommend that you address it quickly. The sooner the better."

"Chemo and radiation?"

"Yes. And then chemo again."

"The magic bullets."

"You could think of it that way, but you might want to choose a different image. Something soothing."

"Like what?"

"I have one patient who thinks of the treatment as flowers."

"Flowers?"

"It soothes her."

"What kind of flowers? Flowers that'll cause my hair to fall out and make me throw up? What kind of flowers would do that?"

"This is your disease, and your body. You get to decide how you want to treat it."

"But that's just the thing, isn't it, Doctor?"

"I'm sorry?"

"This isn't my body anymore."

"Why don't you go home? Take the weekend to think about your options? Get a second opinion, if you'd like."

She rises from the chair, stomps out of the office on her sore, hard feet. The waiting room is full of women. One of them looks up, her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brown eyes beautiful in the soft pelt of her face. She nods slightly. She smells like salt.

When her husband returns from work she is sitting at the kitchen table, waiting to tell him the news.

"Oh my God," he says.

"It hardly hurts at all."

"How long?" he asks.

"Nobody knows, but it seems to be happening sooner rather than later."

He pounds the table with his fist, then reaches for her hand, though he recoils from the shape. "But you're a woman."

She is confused until she sees where he is looking. She touches the antlers' downy stubs on the top of her head. "It's rare, but females get them too. Nobody knows why. Kind of like men and nipples, I guess."

"What are you going to do?" he asks.

"I'm thinking of writing a memoir."

His mouth drops open.

She shrugs. "I always did want to be a writer."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think I should start with the deer being shot, what do you think?"

"I think you need medicine, not writing."

"You make it sound dirty."

He shakes his head. He is crying and shaking his head and all of a sudden she realizes that he will never understand. Should she say so in her memoir? Should she write about all the places he never understood? Will he understand that she doesn't blame him?

"It isn't lonely," she says.

"What?"

She hadn't meant to speak out loud. "I mean, okay, sometimes it is."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"There's a memoir-writing group that meets every Wednesday. I e-mailed Anita, the leader? I explained my situation and she was really nice about it. She said I could join them."

"I don't see how this is going to help. You need medicine and doctors. We need to be proactive here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Could you just be supportive? I really need your support right now."

He looks at her with teary blue eyes that once, she thought, she would look at forever. He says, his voice husky, "Of course."

She is sniffling, and he wipes her nose for her. She licks his hand.

She continues to sleep with him, but in the morning he wakes up with deep scratch marks all over his body, no matter how thickly they wrap her hooves in layers of cloth and old socks and mittens. "They're like little razors," he says. "And it's not just the edges, it's the entire bottom."

She blinks her large brown eyes at him, but he doesn't notice because he is pulling a tick out of his elbow. That night she sleeps on the floor and Wally crawls into bed with her husband. He objects, of course, but in the end, they both sleep better, she, facing the window where she watches the white owl, hugely fat and round, perched on the bough of a tree, before she realizes it isn't the owl at all but the moon.

NEAR THE END she stops trying to drive; instead she runs to her memoir-writing workshop. Her husband follows in the Volvo, thinking that he can prevent her being hit by a car, or shot. He waits in the driveway while she meets with the group.

Anita tries to make her comfortable, but lately she feels nervous coming all the way into the house. She lies in the doorway with only her nose and front hooves inside. Some of the others complain about the cold and the snow but Anita tells them to put on their coats. Sometimes, in the distance, they hear a mournful cry, which makes all of them shudder. There have been rumors of coyotes in the neighborhood.

Even though they meet at Anita's house, she herself is having a terrible time with her memoir. It sounds self-pitying, whiny, and dull. She knows this; she just doesn't know what to do about it, that's why she started the workshop in the first place. The critiquers mean well, but frankly, they are all self-pitying whiners themselves. Somewhere along the way, the meetings have taken on the tone of group therapy rather than a writing workshop. Yet, there is something, some emotion they all seem to circle but never successfully describe about the pain of their lives that, Anita feels certain, just might be the point.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After the critique, Anita brings out cakes, cookies, coffee, tea, and, incredibly, a salt lick. Contrary to their reputation, and the evidence of the stories told in this room, people can be good.

The deer woman hasn't shared what she's written yet. She's not sure the group will understand. How can anyone understand what is happening to her? And besides, it is all happening so fast. No one even realizes when she attends her last meeting that she won't be coming back, though later, they all agree that she seemed different somehow.

She is standing at the window, watching the yard below. Six deer wait there, staring up at her. He weeps and begs her not to go. Why does he do this, she wonders, why does he spend their last moments together weeping? He begs her not to go, as though she had some say in the matter. She does not answer. The world shatters all around her, but she is not cut. He shouts. She crashes to the ground, in a flurry of snow and hooves. He stands at the window, his mouth wide open. He does not mean to hurt her, but she can feel his breath pulling her back. She runs into the forest with the others, a pounding of hooves and clouds of snow. They do not stop running until they are deep into the night, and she can no longer hear her husband shouting.

AFTER SHE IS GONE, he looks through her basket of knitting, projects started and unfinished from the winter, before her hands turned into hooves: a long thin strand of purple, which he assumes is a scarf; a deep green square, which he thinks might be the beginning of a sweater for him; and a soft gray wasp nest, that's what it looks like, knit from the strands of her hair. Underneath all this he finds a simple, spiral-bound notebook. He sits on the floor and reads what she wrote, until the words sputter and waver and finally end, then he walks up the stairs to the attic, where he thrusts aside boxes of books, and dolls, cups, and papers, before finally opening the box labeled "writing supplies." There he finds the cape, neatly folded beneath deerskin boots, a few blades of brown grass stuck to them. The cape fits fine, of course, but the boots are too tight. He takes them downstairs and splits the seams with the paring knife, laces them on with rope. When he is finished, he makes a strange sight, his chest hair

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gray against the winter white skin, the cape draped over his narrow shoulders and down the skein of his arms to his blue jeans, which are tied at the calves, laced over the deerskin, his feet bulging out of the sides, like a child suddenly grown to giant proportions. He runs into the forest, calling her name. Wally, the dog, runs beside him.

THERE ARE SIGHTINGS. An old lady, putting seed into the bird feeder, sees him one morning, a glint of white cape, tight muscles, a wild look in his eyes. Two children, standing right beside their father waiting for the bus, scream and point. An entire group of hunters, who say they tracked him and might have gotten a shot. And an artist, standing in the meadow, but artists are always reporting strange sightings and can't be relied upon. What is certain is that wherever the strange man is sighted, words are found. The old lady finds several tiny slips of paper in a bird nest in her backyard and when one falls to the ground she sees that it is a neat cut-out of the word, "Always," she can't fathom what it might mean, but considers it for the rest of her life, until one afternoon in early autumn she lies dying on her kitchen floor, no trauma beyond the business of a stopped heart, and she sees the word before her face, as though it floated there, a missive from heaven, and she is filled with an understanding of the infinite, and how strange, that this simple word becomes, in that final moment, luminescent; when the father searches the bushes where the children insist the wild man hides, he finds nothing but scraps of paper, tiny pieces, which he almost dismisses, until he realizes that each one contains a word. Frightened of leaving the children too long with madmen about, he scoops some words up and returns to the bus stop, listening to the children's excited chatter but not really hearing anything they say, because the words drag his pocket down like stones, and he can't believe how eager he is to go to work, shut the door to his office and piece together the meaning. He is disappointed at what he finds, "breath," "fingers," and "memory," amongst several versions of "her." It is nonsense, but he cannot forget the words, and at the strangest times catches himself thinking, "Her breath, her fingers, her memory" as though he were a man in love; the hunters follow the trail of words, but only the youngest among them picks up and pockets one torn paper, which is immediately

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forgotten, thrown in the wash and destroyed; the artist finds a neat little pile, as though the wild creature ate words like sunflower seeds and left these scraps behind. She ties each word to colored string and hangs them as a mobile. Sometimes, when the air is just right and the words spin gently, she believes she understands them, that they are not simple nonsense; but on other days she knows that meaning is something humans apply to random acts in order to cope with the randomness of death.

Anita, from the memoir-writing group, goes to the house, uninvited. She doesn't know what motivates her. The woman wrote nothing the whole time she'd attended, had offered no suggestions during the critique; in fact, Anita began to suspect that her main motivation for coming had been the salt lick. But for some reason, Anita felt invested in the woman's unknown story, and feels she must find out what has become of her.

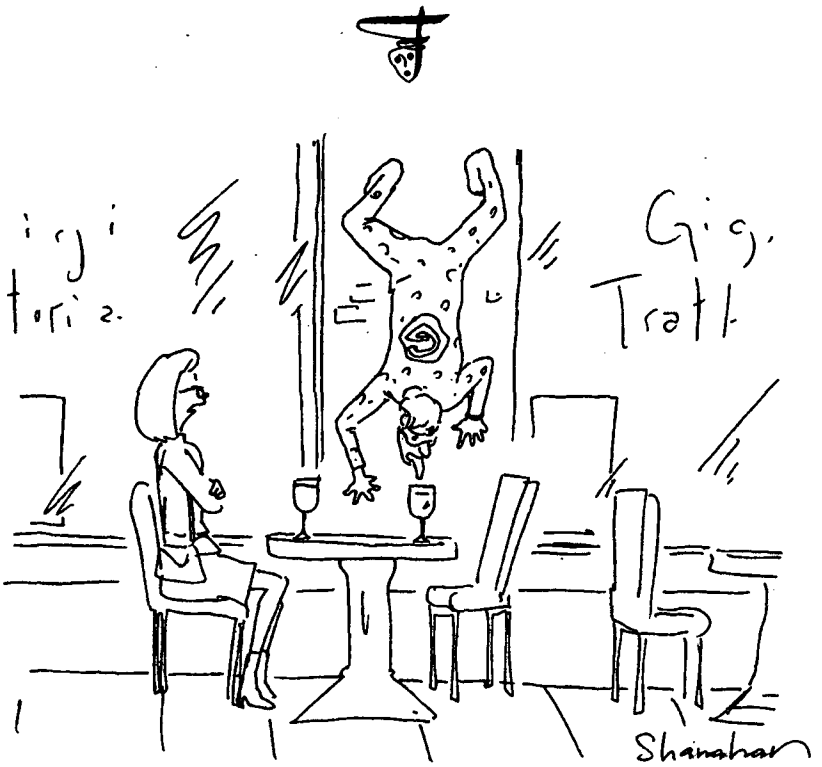
What she finds is a small house in the woods, by all appearances empty. She rings the doorbell and is surprised to hear a dog inside, barking. She notices deer tracks come right up to the porch, circling a hemlock bush. The door opens and a strange man stands there, dressed in torn boots, dirty jeans, and a cape. Anita has heard rumors of the wild man and doesn't know what to say, she manages only two words, "Memoir" and "writing," before he grabs her wrist. "Gone," he says, "gone." They stand there for a while, looking at each other. She is a bit frightened, of course, but she also feels pity for this man, obviously mad with grief. "Words?" he says. She stares at him, and he repeats himself, ("Words, words, words, words, words, words?") until finally she understands what he's asking.

"She never wrote a thing." He shakes his head and runs back into the house. Anita stands there for a moment, and then, just as she turns to walk away from this tragic scene, the man returns, carrying a handful of words. He hands them to her as though they were ashes of the deceased, gently folding her fingers over them, as though in prayer, before he goes back inside.

She shakes her head as she walks away, opening the car door with difficulty, her hands fisted as they are. Once in her car, she drops the words into her purse, where they remain until a windy day in early Fall, when she searches for her keys in the mall parking lot. A quick breeze picks the tiny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scraps up and they twirl in the sky, all the possible, all the forgotten, all the mysterious, unwritten, and misunderstood fragments, and it is only then, when they are hopelessly gone, that Anita regrets having done nothing with them. From this regret, her memoir is written, about the terrible thing that happened to her. She is finally able to write that there is no sorrow greater than regret, no rapture more complete than despair, no beauty more divine than words, but before writing it, she understands, standing there, amidst the cars and shopping bags, watching all the words spin away, as though she had already died, and no longer owned language, that ordinary, every day, exquisite blessing on which lives are both built, and destroyed.



"You're not making this any easier, Geckoman."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Perhaps the devil bats will be a smidgen tardy, but we expect the lavishly illustrated trade paperback reissue of Mr. Goulart's history of the pulps, Cheap Thrills, *to make its scheduled release date in January. Also, a lavishly illustrated trade paperback edition of his coffee table book about 1930s and 1940s comic books,* Comic Book Culture, *is due out by the end of 2006. Alas, the lavishly illustrated new edition of* Ron Goulart's Weekly *is delayed in anticipation of more lavish illustrations, but with this new story in hand, who's going to complain!*

The Devil Bats Will Be a Little Late This Year

By Ron Goulart

I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN to anyone the real reason why I'm going to be somewhat late turning in my script for *Devil Bats of the Amazon: III.* That's because my excuse involves ghosts, demons, two of my former wives, and a defrocked exorcist. Not, for various reasons, things I can safely discuss openly.

It's been my experience, after making a comfortable, though not spectacular, living as a screenwriter for over twenty years, that the average moviegoer doesn't pay much attention to writing credits. Therefore my name wouldn't produce a shock of recognition from most people. Anyway, I'm Frank Kennison and I specialize in horror movies. I wrote *Devil Bats of the Amazon* and its sequel *Devil Bats of the Amazon: II.* That latter one was nominated for an Oscar. Not, unfortunately, for my screenplay but for the Special Effects. Still, I can legitimately say that I'm associated with an Oscar-nominated film. Which I do in all my bios.

Some of my other movies, which do very well on the budget DVD market, include *Nosebleed, Nosebleed II, The Invisible Mummy, The*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mysterious Carton of Chinese Noodles (an unfortunate title the distributor stuck on my adaptation of a very scary Chinese movie), and *The Return of the Cannibal Coeds*, the thriller that introduced Betsy Donwin to the screen.

Betsy was my first wife and has only a little to do with this current mess. It was Carolyn Barnes, the very successful author of those cute kid books about the Incontinent Kitten, who was a major contributor to screwing up my life, entangling me with real supernatural stuff, and causing me to fall behind on this script that I owe Pentagram Pictures. I was married to Carolyn for just shy of three years. She's my third and most recent ex-wife and it was, basically, because she inherited a gloomy Victorian mansion in the hills above the Southern California coastal town of Santa Rita Beach that I experienced all the troubles listed above.

Over the years I've written several screenplays about malignant old houses, including *The Emeryville Horror, The Thing in the Septic Tank*, and *Fatal Mortgage*. But that was all fiction that fit into a traditional spooky movie genre and I never, until now, believed that such houses existed. Then Carolyn reinserted herself into my life by way of a message that I found waiting for me on my cell phone when I got back into my eleven-year-old Mercedes (bought when my income was somewhat more comfortable than it is now) after an unproductive lunch with a very low-budget producer. That was on a gray Thursday toward the end of October.

The message, unlike many of Carolyn's recent communications, was fairly cordial. In that precise, slightly nasal voice of hers, she said, "I hope, Frank dear, you'll forgive the unkind things I said during our chance encounter on La Cienega a couple of months ago. Since you're an expert on matters occult, darling, I'm turning to you for help. This damned mansion of mine has.... Oh, my god, I—" Her words stopped abruptly and were followed by a long, heartfelt scream. The phone went dead.

When I tried to call Carolyn, I got no answer. Not even from her answering machine. Her hillside mansion in Santa Rita Beach was just one town away. A drive, even in a Mercedes of diminished capacity, of a little over twenty minutes. I decided, since she wasn't someone given to frivolous screaming, to drive over and determine what in the hell was wrong. That was only my first error of judgment.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Anybody who's seen more than one haunted house movie, let alone a guy who's written fourteen of the things thus far in his career, knows you shouldn't walk into any old dark mansion where you find the front door partly open if you're interested in avoiding trouble.

I walked right into Carolyn's recently inherited mansion, however, despite the fact that the thick oaken door was standing at least a foot open. For one thing, it had commenced raining midway through my drive over, heavy aggressive rain. Beside the fact that I was eager to get in out of the downpour, I was very curious to learn what had happened to her. I seem to take an unfortunate interest in the wellbeing of most of my former wives.

"Carolyn?" I called out as I entered the long, dark-paneled hallway. It was dimlit and there was a strong, pervasive odor of brimstone. To my knowledge, I've never actually smelled brimstone but I was dead certain that was what I was smelling. "Carolyn?"

I took a few tentative steps along the faded Persian hall carpet and chanced to look into the parlor, also dimlit, on my right. "Holy shit," I observed.

Carolyn, who's a slim blonde woman of thirty-one, was floating about three feet above the venerable hardwood floor. She was unconscious, her long hair disheveled, and wearing only some lingerie the color of lemon curd.

As I crossed the parlor threshold, I bumped into a clawfoot table, causing a vase full of dried pussywillows to teeter, then go hopping downward to the floor.

From somewhere a few feet above my floating, supine, erstwhile wife, came an annoyed grumbling sound, followed by brief blurred shimmering and a loud popping. Then Carolyn dropped to the floor, landing on a somewhat tattered throw-rug and sending up a thin spurt of pale gray dust.

Sprinting, I knelt beside her, took hold of one of her wrists and began rubbing it vigorously. The reason for this procedure I wasn't exactly certain about, but I've used it frequently in my scripts for similar incidents.

She was breathing in what struck me as a normal way. I noticed, even in the dim light of the late afternoon parlor, that there were reddish marks on both her bare arms and others on her freckled left shoulder.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carolyn moaned at the same instant that I became aware that my left foot was entangled in some sort of cloth. Turning, I discovered it was a pair of the warm-up pants she always wore when she was writing. Beside them, in a wrinkled sprawl, was one of her faded UCLA sweatshirts.

"Frank," she said in a faraway voice as she opened her eyes. "You can't imagine what just happened."

"Judging by the evidence, you were partially undressed by an invisible man," I suggested, helping her to sit up.

"Don't be dopey. It was a ghost and he was in the process of assaulting me," she said. "Apparently your advent scared him off."

"Has this happened before?"

She shook her head, carefully. "No, today was the first time," Carolyn replied. "Though he's been lurking around the place for close to three weeks."

I, in my most gentlemanly manner, aided my partially clothed ex-wife to make her way over to the Victorian loveseat near the narrow stone fireplace. After helping her to get comfortably seated, I gathered up her scattered garments and handed them to her. "Is this a ghost that comes with the mansion?"

Carolyn frowned, touching at a tender spot on her shoulder. "Not exactly, Frank, no." She accepted the bundle of clothes, then dropped them on the loveseat beside her.

"Not exactly?"

"Well now, dear, don't go having a fit and playing the jealous husband when I explain that — "

"Hey, I haven't been your husband, jealous or otherwise, for almost two long, blissful years, Carrie," I reminded her while lowering myself into a creaky bentwood rocker facing her. "But considering the number of times you cheated on me during our tumultuous marriage, raising my voice now and then was certainly justified and — "

"Two or three teeny affairs and you treated me as though I were Madame Bovary or some dreadful woman left over from a Tolstoy novel."

"Who just attacked you?"

"A ghost."

"You already stated that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She sighed, draped the old UCLA sweatshirt across her thighs. "A divorced woman gets lonely," Carolyn began. "Especially during the dry spells when I'm not in the throes of creating another Incontinent Kitten potential bestseller. So I...well, availed myself of a few computer dating services in order to meet a few interesting new men. And one of them sort of moved in with me about six months ago."

"That was this ghost?"

"Nitwit, he wasn't a ghost then."

"Details?"

She sighed yet again. "Ulrich seemed very nice at first. He was considerate, tall and very good looking, an excellent gourmet cook and very handy around the house," she continued. "Unlike you, dear, Ulrich was a wiz at carpentry and there wasn't an electrical or plumbing problem, and this place had lots of them, that he couldn't solve. He — "

"Ulrich? You were shacked up with somebody named Ulrich?"

"It's a perfectly acceptable old name. In Germany there are, I'd guess, legions of Ulrichs. The name is probably as common as Frank."

"And his last name?"

She hesitated, then answered, quietly, "Well, it was Zillbusher."

"You were shacked up with somebody named Ulrich Zillbusher?"

"Let me get on with explaining the terrifying situation I find myself in right now today, Frank dear."

"In moments of passion what did you cry out? Ulrich, Ulrich? Or Zillbusher, Zillbusher?"

Ignoring me, Carolyn went on. "I soon discovered that he was an extremely passionate man. And, later on, that he had some strange interests."

"Sexual interests?"

"Those, too, but worse yet, he was into black magic, sorcery, the summoning of demons from the netherworld, Satanic rituals and — "

"Wait, whoa," I cut in. "Ulrich practiced all this stuff right here in this ramshackle mansion you inherited last year from your Great Aunt Marie?"

"Right here on the premises, yes."

"How exactly did Ulrich become a ghost?"

"Well, that process began while I was suggesting that he pack up and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

get the hell out of here and troll the Net for a new sweetie," Carolyn told me. "Perhaps one who would put up with his sexual aggressiveness as well as his unhealthy interest in the supernatural."

"By that time stuff like Devil worship had no doubt warped his — "

"He became enraged and attempted to grab me," she continued. "That was when I hit him."

"With what?"

"A meat grinder," Carolyn answered. "You know, one of those old-fashioned ones that you screw on the edge of a table and they weigh an awful lot. It belonged to my great aunt."

"Sure, I used a meat grinder like that in *Guess Which Zombie's Coming To Dinner* for Pentagram back in 1989," I said, nodding. "So you conked the guy with one when he attempted to assault you. That's clearly self-defense. I assume your attorney — that sleek son of a bitch who got you such an onerous divorce settlement despite your — "

"I never went to the police," she explained. "I mean, innocent though I was, I wanted to avoid the media's getting hold of the story. 'Gifted Author of the Fabulously Entertaining Incontinent Kitten Potential Children's Classics Bops Horny Lover on the Coco with Antique Meat Grinder.' Not at all good for my reputation."

"And much too long for a headline." I gave her a questioning look. "So what happened to Ulrich?"

Very slowly, she pointed down at the floor. "These old Victorians have immense basements."

"You buried the body in the basement?"

"I couldn't very well bury him in the front yard."

"True. When was all this?"

"This past August. The twenty-second to be exact."

As a recent convert to a belief in ghosts, I then asked, "And when did his spirit start haunting you, Carolyn?"

"Exactly three weeks ago today."

"Are there occasions when you can actually see the guy? When I got here, he was invisible."

"Well, Ulrich goes in and out of focus. Sometimes he shows up looking just about as he did when he was extant," she replied. "Others I can only infer that he's about the house. No matter what phase he's in, I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can always hear his heavy, horny breathing and that annoying snuffling sound he sometimes makes through his nose."

"Snuffling must be hard to do through a ghostly nose."

"Will you quit making wiseass remarks?" my former wife requested. "The reason I phoned you earlier, Frank, even though we haven't been on exactly friendly terms lately, was that you're an expert on the occult and the supernatural because of writing all those cheesy movies. I need your help to get rid of Ulrich's vengeful ghost."

IN MANY of my movies, especially those featuring an invulnerable and undying serial killer, there's always the possibility that the threat'll return later in a film with a II or a III someplace in the title. Life, too, can sometimes go in for sequels. On that gray rainswept afternoon that I inadvertently rescued Carolyn from the ghost of Ulrich Zillbusher I voluntarily got ensnared with her once more.

Yeah, I found myself agreeing to move into her gloomy old Victorian mansion for a while.

"He dare not materialize with you here, Frank dear," my former spouse assured me. "Your stay won't be a long-term thing, since as an expert on occult matters, you'll be able to clear my house of Ulrich in a jiffy."

"The bodyguard part I can handle," I said. "But remember that I only write about ghost busters, Carolyn. I don't actually practice ghost busting."

"Listen, I have faith in you," she assured me. "While we were married, you often accused me, in that loud voice you assume when you're deeply ticked off, of not having faith in you. But you can see that here and now I'm being completely supportive."

"Your lack of faith in my talent as a writer was what I was complaining about," I said. "But, okay, all right, I'll spend a few days under your roof and I'll try to come up with a way to eject Ulrich."

Right there I had committed two more fateful errors. You should never move back in with a former wife, particularly one who'd proven her incompatibility in myriad ways. And, having no real life experience with unearthly things, you shouldn't promise to exterminate a ghost.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm really glad you've agreed to come back into my life, dear." She jumped up from the loveseat, losing the sweatshirt that had been draped across her legs, and came, barefooted, over to the rocker. "I know that I'm going to be eternally grateful to you for clearing up this awful situation."

When she sat on my lap and hugged me, the bentwood rocker began rocking vigorously.

As darkness fell on the haunted mansion, I committed yet another mistake. But by the time I realized it, I'd been in bed with Carolyn for nearly an hour and it was too late.

Putting her lips close to my bad ear, she whispered warmly, "You're much gentler than Ulrich."

"King Kong is much gentler than Ulrich."

She sighed in my ear. "I meant it as a compliment, Groucho."

"Okay, I accept it as — "

"Oh, damn," she exclaimed, sitting up and emerging from beneath Great Aunt Marie's crazy quilt.

I heard the sound now, too. I had the impression that someone was, very slowly, dragging a wheelbarrow full of scrap metal up the wooden stairs to the second floor.

"What the devil is that, Carrie?"

"We should've discussed this earlier," she said, staring at the closed door of the master bedroom. "I'm pretty sure this is Urgh Zgrun."

The clanging and rattling was growing louder and closer. "Another of your Internet beaus?" I was leaning over the edge of the four-poster, groping around on the floor for my discarded shirt.

"Oh, it's one of the demons Ulrich summoned up to do his bidding. They don't seem to have gone away even though he's deceased."

"One of?"

"There are three of them I think." She shivered, hugged herself. "But Shug Ngryz and Grb Shogov look an awful lot alike — big, green, and scaly — and they may be the same demon from the netherworld under two names."

"Is this one who's fast approaching likely to attack us?"

"Probably not," she replied without complete conviction. "I've tried to explain to them that Ulrich is as departed as anyone can be and they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't have to hang around anymore," she said, her teeth faintly chattering. "I'm afraid though that he still controls them even in his ghost state and he's using them to harass me. And now you."

Fetching up my shirt, I placed it over her bare shoulders. "Let me see if I can negotiate with — "

"Frank Kennilworth," boomed a huge gravelly voice from just beyond the heavy door.

"He means you," she said, nudging me in the ribs.

"You'd think a demon from the netherworld would get my name right."

"Frank Kermisson," said the demon at the door. "I bring a warning, rash mortal."

"Okay," I responded in a dim voice not quite like my own.

"Leave this house within one more day or meet your terrible doom!"

The sound of heavy scrap metal being dragged back downstairs started up and quickly grew faint.

"What produces that noise this demon makes?"

"He's got a lot of spiky protrusions and big hard scales. They flap and clank while he lumbers along."

"Lumbers? He doesn't simply walk?"

She nodded. "I'm really sorry, Frank. It looks like Ulrich's ghost wants you out of here so he can have me to himself again. Apparently he's using these demon buddies of his to scare you."

"He's been fairly successful."

"But you won't desert me, dear?"

I shook my head. "Nope," I assured my former wife. "But I'll have to figure out a way to evict Ulrich's spirit. Hopefully he'll take his assorted demons with him when he departs."

She sighed, putting both arms tight around me. "I appreciate that, Frank."

Okay, one more dangerous error of judgment.

I'm an early riser, Carolyn isn't. By seven the next morning, while she was still slumbering under the multicolored quilt, I was descending to the kitchen and thinking about how to remedy the deplorable situation in which I found myself.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What I needed, and soon, was expert help. Help of the sort Carolyn was convinced I was capable of delivering. There was a priest I'd interviewed three years ago who claimed to be a first-rate exorcist. At the time I didn't believe the guy, but he did give me some good ideas for my 1996 movie *A Room With A Ghost.* I'd phone Father Bray right after breakfast.

Maybe *before* breakfast was a better idea, I was thinking as I stepped into the big white kitchen.

"What exactly am I doing here?" asked the pretty red-haired young woman who was sitting at the heavy walnut kitchen table. Both her hands were clutching a cup of Starbucks coffee.

I inquired, "Betsy, what brings you here? The alimony payments you're still gouging out of me are being sent on time and — "

"Damned if I know," admitted Betsy Donwin, my first wife. She was wearing a white cable-stitch sweater and tan jeans and looking perplexed. "One minute I'm sitting in a Starbucks on Wilshire and then, bang, I'm here. How'd you work this nasty little trick, Frank?"

I sat, gingerly, across the round wide table from her. "I'll be honest with you, Betsy — " I began.

"That's more than you were able to be during our lousy, and fortunately short, marriage," she mentioned.

"Hey, let's not forget that, for all of my faults, I made you a star."

"You made me miserable," she said. "It wasn't until my agent got me out of those crappy movies of yours that my career blossomed and I became a major player. Which I still am, again no thanks to you, dear heart."

"What we have to figure out, Betsy, is how and why you — "

"Attend to me, vile mortal," she said in a new, deep and profoundly raspy voice.

I noticed that her coffee had started to boil and bubble and was spilling up over the lip of the container. "Shit, you've obviously been taken over by a demon," I realized. "I used a similar device in *Invasion of the Shapechangers* in 2001, but I never, until now — "

"Cease your prattle, Frank Kennison," ordered Betsy. "I am Shug Ngryz and I have taken control of this frail creature's body in order to deliver another warning to you."

"Urgh Zgrun — I'm only guessing since I never got a look at the guy — but I think he called on us in his true form."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My true form, misguided creature, is many times more horrible than that of Urgh Zgrun, quite a bit more horrendous. A man of your advanced years gazing on my true form for the first time might well die of fright."

"Isn't that what you want me to do?" I asked. "And, hey, I'm only thirty-eight, which isn't an especially advanced — "

"You're forty-three," spoke the demon inside my first wife. "We don't wish you to pass away, Frank. As a favor to our departed master, we simply want you to vacate so that he can continue his spectral courting of the fair...Jesus, have I got a sore throat." That last line was in Betsy's own smoky voice.

"Have you been able to hear what Shug Ngryz was — "

"I sure have, Frank, and it sounds to me like you're in deep trouble." She noticed that some of her coffee had spilled out onto the tabletop. "How about being useful for a change and getting something to wipe up this mess?"

I rose from my chair, grabbed one of Great Aunt Marie's embroidered dish towels off a wall hook and started rubbing at the pool of coffee.

"Lost contact for a moment there," said the voice of the demon. "As I was explaining to you, Frank my friend, pack your bags and flee or the vengeance of Ulrich Zillbusher will descend upon you."

"Actually I don't have any bags to pack. I haven't had time, what with one thing and another, to get over to my place in Bayside to gather my laptop and a few — "

"Begone," advised the demon. "Or be prepared to...." After a few seconds, Betsy got up, a bit wobbly. "Frank, it's been nice to see you again. But the next time a demon wants to communicate with you, tell him to use e-mail or his cell phone. Can I go now?"

"I suppose so, since Shug Ngryz has apparently left for good." I walked with her to the kitchen doorway. "Do you need cab fare?"

"Aren't you going to drive me back to Starbucks?"

"I'd better stay here to look after Carolyn, just in case a demon — "

"You back with that bitch?" Shaking her head, she started down the long shadowy hallway. "A big mistake, Frank."

"I didn't, actually, have a choice. And it isn't going to be a long term — "

"If the demons don't get you, let me know how all this turns out." She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

took hold of the big brass door knob on the street door. "But *phone* me, don't try to drop around in person. I'm not *that* interested in your fate." Opening the door, she went down the steps and away into the misty gray morning.

IT TOOK MORE phone calls than I'd anticipated to track down Father Matthew Bray. That was because he was no longer a priest. Finally, about ten that morning, I got help from a friend of mine who writes the religious news column for the *Bayside News-Pilot*.

"They tossed Bray out of his parish," Dan Bockman informed me. "Then he was excommunicated."

"Some sort of sex scandal?"

"No, Father Bray was simply a crook and they found out he'd swiped something like $63,000 from his church," Bockman said. "They didn't prosecute and he's still at liberty. Why do you want him?"

"I find myself in need of an exorcist."

"You still writing those cheap horror flicks, huh?"

No use trying to explain that one of my ex-wives was being haunted. "Exactly. I'm in the middle of a new script for Pentagram and need some technical stuff."

"I thought Pentagram went belly up last winter."

"They got bought out by an oil cartel over in the Middle East. How can I get in touch with Bray?"

"The reverend is now running an outfit he calls Supernatural Detective Services. It's in Santa Monica. Look him up in the directory."

I hung up and did just that.

When Carolyn came down for breakfast at a little after eleven, looking attractive in a candy-striped blouse and a short gray skirt, I filled her in about what had been happening.

"This Father Bray charges how much?" she asked as she popped two frozen wheat-free waffles into her toaster oven.

"Ninety-five dollars per hour."

"Couldn't you talk him down?"

"I did. He usually charges a hundred twenty."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She turned her back on the toaster oven. "Maybe we should try for somebody else."

"He's probably the best man for the job," I told her. "He'll arrive after ten tonight."

"So late?"

"Bray says the best time for exorcising is after dark."

She shrugged one slim shoulder. "Okay, let's hope he's not full of crap."

"I'm going to have to drive over to my place to pick up some clothes, my shaving kit, my pills and supplements plus my laptop."

"But, Frank, that'll leave me alone and vulnerable."

"Father Bray suggests you hang a wreath of garlic around your neck. That should protect you during the few hours I'm not here."

"C'mon, every ninny knows that garlic scares off *vampires*, not ghosts or demons."

"Bray says it's a little known fact, but garlic is also effective with spirits from the beyond and demons from the netherworld."

"How the hell am I going to create a necklace of garlic?" She placed the two waffles on a plate, carried them to the table. "What I've got in the house is two dinky cloves of the stuff."

"That should do for a few-hour stretch."

"I wish ghosts and demons were allergic to something less smelly."

Fifteen minutes later, as I was guiding my Mercedes homeward, my agent contacted me on my cell phone. "This is Lew Murdstone of the Murdstone-Terrific Talent Agency," he announced.

"I guessed as much, Lew. Now, about the script for — "

"Ah, then you haven't been struck with sudden amnesia," he cut in. "You haven't been kidnapped by terrorists and held for ransom. In fact, you don't have one single goddamn reason for being late on *Devil Bats of the Amazon: IV.*"

"Three, Lew. We're only up to the third one."

"You know I always vet your scripts before I deliver them," my agent reminded me in a disgruntled voice. "Your first draft was supposed to be on my desk *yesterday*, schmuck."

"You'll have it by week's end."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The weekend isn't yesterday."

"Yeah, I've heard that. However, I've had some personal problems that slowed me — "

"Which one?"

"Hum?"

"Which former wife of yours lured you away from stern duty?"

"Matter of fact, Lew, I had to help Carolyn out of a small mess and so — "

"Carolyn Barnes," Lew reflected, "that's not as bad as it could be. She's the least abominable of your team of shrews. All right, putz, I expect the script by Friday, early. Pentagram has to have it no later than November One. Farewell."

I returned to the gloomy mansion just before two in the afternoon. While I was setting down my suitcase, attaché case, and laptop in the shadowy corridor, I heard two voices talking in the parlor.

Striding in there, I found Carolyn drinking wine with a bald, sun-tanned man of about fifty. "Christ, the demon has assumed another human form," I exclaimed.

"Don't be silly, Frank," advised my former wife. "This is just Phil. Phil Renfrew."

Getting up out of the bentwood rocker, Phil favored me with a cordial smile. "Hi, Frank," he said. "I'm a great fan of your movies, especially *Nightmare in Oxnard.*"

Ignoring him, I addressed Carolyn. "Why is Phil here in the parlor with you drinking inexpensive California wine?"

"He was concerned about me," she explained. "You see, before I called you yesterday, I e-mailed Phil to tell him about some of my supernatural concerns."

"Is he a leftover from the louts you were seeing on the sly during our marriage or — "

"Phil is a new friend and you needn't act like a — "

"Say, folks," said Phil, setting his wine glass on a clawfooted table and easing toward the doorway, "I'd best be leaving."

"There's no need, Phil, to go hurtling away simply because — "

"Have an appointment with my personal trainer." He hurriedly departed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There was no need to be so rude to my friend," Carolyn told me as the front door closed.

"Let's just hope we can get rid of Ulrich as easily."

AFTER I UNPACKED in the second floor bedroom Carolyn had assigned me for my (hopefully brief) stay, I set up my laptop on a heavy oaken dressing table.

I was planning to get started by rereading the last few pages of *Devil Bats of the Amazon: III* that I'd written. But as I was scrolling along toward the page where I'd left off, I chanced accidentally to read what it said on the rest of the pages.

"Jesus H. Christ," I remarked, pressing both my hands to the tabletop and staring at the screen. Someone had done major tampering with my copy.

EXT. NIGHT – JUNGLE

GENERAL CUSTER

Well, Annie dear, what do you have to report?

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

The President — better known to you as Prez — has instructed me to inform you that if this stooge Frank Kennison isn't out of Carolyn's house by dawn mañana, stuff is going to hit the fan.

CUSTER

We better let Sitting Bull know. Tell John Wayne to send him a smoke signal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ANNIE

John's quit smoking.

CUSTER

Then we'll have to set Frank's laptop on fire and hope Sitting Bull sees it.

"Whoa, this isn't my script," I said aloud, glancing around the big bedroom. "Somebody's sabotaged it."

My computer produced a low explosive noise, then a full color moving image of a raging forest fire filled the screen. An animated cartoon featuring Little Orphan Annie took the fire's place. "To borrow from Ethel Barrymore," she said. "That's all there is, there isn't any more."

The screen went black.

Hunching over the laptop, I tried every retrieval method I knew or had even heard about to try finding my lost copy. But the hundred and three pages of my nearly completed script failed to show up.

I slumped back in my chair, folded my hands, and stared at the dead screen. Black and white footage of the Oval Office at the White House came up. What was probably the Marine Band commenced playing "Hail to the Chief." The President of the United States sauntered into the room and seated himself.

Briefly assuming an Uncle-Sam-wants-you pose, he pointed at me. "My advisers who advise me on paranormal matters, Frank," he drawled, "have advised me that it's just not smart to mess around with demons or Ulrich Zillbusher. If I was you, I'd scram while you can. Sometimes withdrawal is the wisest course."

My laptop shivered, swayed, produced a series of lugubrious burps, and jumped clean off the table.

After a few stunned seconds, I remembered that I had my script notes and quite a few hard copy pages of an earlier draft in my attaché case. I hurried over to the four poster. The mattress was covered with another of Great Aunt Marie's multicolored quilts. My case sat smack in the middle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I reached for the lock. The lid popped up before I could touch the case. Chocolate-colored smoke came billowing up to swirl around my head.

Lunging, I grabbed the handle. "Yow!" It was incredibly hot.

I stumbled back until I bumped into a wall.

From inside the open attaché case came the sound of paper crackling and burning, plus the acrid smell of plastic melting and sizzling.

Every trace of my overdue script was gone now. "I'll have to start from scratch," I told myself. "And finish by Friday."

Hurried footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. Carolyn arrived in the room. Wrinkling her nose, scowling, she inquired, "What's happening?"

"Demons," I replied.

Wearing a simple black cocktail dress that she'd changed into after dinner, Carolyn entered the parlor at about 9:30. She was carrying a thick ancient leather-bound book. "Ulrich collected a great many odd books, of which this is by far the oddest, Frank." She halted and looked slowly around the shadowy parlor. "Funny."

"Are you sensing that Ulrich's ghost is in the vicinity?"

Placing the heavy book on one of the clawfooted tables, she said, "I'm getting that just-before-the-goose-pimples-show-up feeling. Maybe I'm merely nervous and imagining things. I don't think so, though."

I left the rocker to examine the book. "'*The Dark, Forbidden and Most Accursed Prolegomena to the Study of the Black Art of Summoning and Mastering Demons from the Fiery Pits of the Netherworld,*'" I read aloud. "Catchy title."

"It's an early eighteenth-century reprint of a much earlier work attributed to the notorious sorcerer Count Monstrodamus."

"Yeah, I see his name here on the cover. They call him, 'The Vile and Infamous Disciple of the Prince of Darkness and Foul Master of the Black Arts Who Was Burned at the Stake for his Blasphemous Practices.'"

"Ulrich found the count's writings, while a bit verbose, very useful in helping him contact his demons and control them," she explained, sitting on the loveseat. "It was Ulrich's belief that if you could get a powerful demon working for you, every sort of success would come your way. And he explained to me how certain spells worked."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I asked her, "Why'd you bring the book down here now?"

"Use your head, dummy. Father Bray will obviously want to consult it," she told me. "In addition to very effective spells for summoning demons, there are also spells for sending them away. I've browsed through this book quite a few times and I'm certain that any occult expert would find Count Monstrodamus's book helpful in — "

"A nice thought, hon," remarked the small, white-haired man standing now in the parlor doorway. His hair was close-cropped and the pockets of his black priest-style suit were full of small objects (one of which was making small croaking sounds). Under his left arm he was holding a large, fat volume that was bigger and heftier than the tome Carolyn had brought.

"How'd you get in?" she asked the exorcist.

Bray smiled. "I think I've finally mastered the art of teleportation, my dear," he said "Last time I tried it, I was attempting to call on a client in Bel Air but I ended up at an overly quaint soda fountain down in Disneyland with a sweaty lad in a Mickey Mouse suit giving me a welcoming hug."

"What's that book you're lugging with you?" she asked him.

He lifted Ulrich's book off the able, dropping it to the faded Persian carpet. "This book of yours, my dear, while serviceable, is the abridged 1803 Lisbon edition and lacks several important spells as well as Count Monstrodamus's brilliant essay on how to name demons. Mine is the rarer 1733 Paris edition. Only 230 copies were printed, twenty-five of them, it is rumored, bound in human skin." He replaced Ulrich's book with his.

"Well, Ulrich thought his edition was superior to any — "

"Ulrich was quite probably a dimbulb," the defrocked priest told her, reaching down to tap the massive red leather cover. "Whereas Count Monstrodamus was an extremely gifted magus. A shame, in a way, that they hanged him before he reached the age of fifty."

I pointed a thumb at the book he'd dumped on the rug. "Says there that he was burned at the stake."

"They *tried* to knock him off that way, but he escaped," said Bray, eyeing me for a few silent seconds. "You've gone further to seed since I lent you a hand on that quintessential turkey, *There's a Ghost in My Room*. A man approaching fifty, my boy, ought to exercise more and cut down on the carbs and booze."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"*A Room with a Ghost* was the title, Father," I corrected. "And I'm only approaching forty-two."

"Alas, then you're in even worse shape than I — "

"Mr. Bray," interrupted Carolyn, "could we, please, get back to the business that I'm paying you such an inflated price for? How are you planning to rid my mansion of — "

"Forgive my digressions, ma'am." Reaching deep into one of the lumpy pockets of his rumpled black suit, Bray extracted a folded sheet of yellow memo paper. "I've written out an itinerary." As he unfolded the memo, a small grayish toad came wiggling up out of the coat pocket he'd just dipped into.

Emitting a single forlorn croak, it sprang to the floor, bounced upon landing, then hopped off into the shadows beyond the fireplace.

Carolyn, perturbed, asked, "Why are you carrying that poor little thing around with you?"

"You'd be surprised how many spells call for a toad."

"I sure hope you aren't planning to sacrifice any living creatures in my parlor."

"Suppose," I suggested, "we get on with the house cleaning."

"I'm in the process of so doing." Bray paused to scowl in my direction before returning his attention to his itinerary for the evening. "Prior to ridding you of any lingering demons, Ms. Barnes, I intend to search the mansion for a trace of the spectral manifestation who's been annoying you. Once I locate the wraith of Ulrich Zillbusher, I'll swiftly dispatch him to the hereafter and — "

"I'll save you some time, asshole. Here I am." Completely visible, the ghost of Carolyn's dead boyfriend was standing in the parlor doorway, arms spread wide. "And *you*, padre, are the one who's going to get dispatched."

Ulrich was large and wide, his shaggy blond hair worn long. His nose had been broken at some point in his lifetime and his chin wasn't as prominent as it might've been. For some reason he was wearing polka-dot pajamas. This was my first encounter with an actual ghost and for all I knew all sorts of actual ghosts went around in polka-dot pajamas. Still, it struck me as odd and I knew I would never dress a ghost in any of my movies in polka-dot pajamas, especially a pair with legs that ended an inch or so below the knee.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Inhaling sharply, Carolyn watched wide-eyed as Ulrich eased farther into the parlor.

Unobtrusively, I moved closer to my former wife. "Why the pajamas?" I inquired quietly.

"His idea of a joke," she whispered. "I gave them to him in happier times."

The ghost pointed a spectral finger at me. "So this is your ex, Carolyn?" he said. "Even Phil is an improvement over him."

"Enough of this." Father Bray's voice sounding even more Irish, he brought the yellow memo up closer to his eyes. "Okay, we'll start with the Holy Water."

While our exorcist was patting one of his coat pockets, Ulrich took two ghostly steps in our direction. "I can tear you limb from limb. Kennison," he told me. "Or you can haul ass and leave Carolyn to me. Your choice, buddy."

"You aren't going to be on this plane of existence long enough to do much tearing of anybody's limb — "

"Why have you got your Holy Water in an Evian bottle?" asked Carolyn, who was gazing over in Bray's direction.

"It *is* Evian." He twisted off the cap. "Much purer than tap water, chlorine-free and no salt. I bless it myself, same as I did back in my priestly days."

Grunting once, Ulrich spun around. "Okay, Kennison, I'll have to take care of this defrocked dude first." He moved across the parlor toward Father Bray.

"I think not." He threw the contents of the bottle at the approaching specter.

When the first drops hit Ulrich, his polka-dot pajamas commenced to smoke, sending off thin foul-smelling yellowish tendrils.

"Candle, candle," Bray urged himself, patting his pockets. "Ah." From the same pocket that had contained the memo and the toad, he took a squat yellow votive candle.

Ulrich, smoking impressively from head to toe, staggered closer to the exorcist.

Bray lit his candle with a wooden match dug out of another pocket. Grasping it in his right hand, he held it straight out and recited what was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apparently a spell he knew by heart. Much of it seemed to be in Latin. I caught the names of several religious and occult entities, plus a few interpolated English words and phrases, such as depart, abandon, and hit the road.

Ulrich halted in his lurching approach to Bray. He was swaying now, engulfed in thickening swirls of smoke and making faint annoyed grunts.

Our exorcist tossed the burning candle at the now-flickering specter. When the flame passed through the fading ghost's polka-dot-clad figure, Ulrich's ghost vanished and a substantial explosion occurred.

The explosion was of sufficient force to shove Carolyn and me back against the parlor wall. The table holding the heavier edition of the Count Monstrodamus book shot up off the floor. The big leather-bound book went spinning through the smoky air to whap Father Bray hard across the forehead. He yelped once before toppling over, hitting the carpet, and passing out.

Shivering, Carolyn hugged me and sighed. "Well, that takes care of Ulrich," she said, relieved.

"But not us," announced the largest, greenest, and most repulsive of the three demons who'd materialized in the center of the room. His scaly head bumped the dangling crystal chandelier.

Carolyn hugged me more tightly, sighed more deeply and increased her rate of shivering.

"Our first demand," announced the demon spokesperson, "is that you revive your sprawled cleric and instruct him to reverse his exorcism."

"I have no intention of doing that," Carolyn informed him defiantly. "Not after all we went through to get rid of Ulrich in the first place."

"We wish him *back*," demanded the demon, who I assumed was Shug Ngryz, since he was the least personable of the lot. To further indicate that he was ticked off, he stomped on the carpet with a scaly clawed foot. A smoldering patch of rug, the size of Shug Ngryz's right foot, resulted.

Another of the demons, who possessed, I now noticed, a long forked tail, warned, "If you do not obey us, we shall devour you." In addition to a forked tail, he also had a great many large, very sharp teeth.

Carolyn, her face very close to mine, said in a low voice, "Cause a diversion. I'll get to Ulrich's copy of Monstrodamus and use one of the spells."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I gave a very discreet nod, then pushed her aside and shouted, "No, Carrie, we must capitulate to these guys." I walked nearer to the green trio. "I'll get to work reviving Father Bray."

"You have made a wise decision, worthless mortal," commended the one who was probably Shug Ngryz.

I took a couple of steps in the direction of the still unconscious occultist, then faked a sprawling fall over the tipped clawfoot table.

Regaining my balance, flapping my arms to maintain it, I went staggering beyond Bray and bumped into another of the parlor's many clawfoot tables. That fell over, causing the stuffed owl that had been perched atop it to slam into the rickety Chinese screen in front of one of the shuttered windows.

Impatient, the fork-tailed demon observed, "You're annoyingly clumsy." A foot-long burst of flame shot out of his mouth along with the angry words.

When I'd weaved my way back to Bray, I knelt beside him and pressed my palm to his chest. "Good lord!" I exclaimed. "He's stone cold dead!"

Bray somewhat spoiled the effect by moaning at that point, loudly, and sitting up to glance around him. He noticed the demons, all of whom had been watching my progress and were now producing roars that indicated disappointment in my behavior. "What have we here, my boy?"

"Basically a screwed-up diversion."

At the other side of the parlor Carolyn grabbed up the book and was opening it to the spell she wanted.

My diversionary tactics ceased to be effective just then and Shug Ngryz's head turned toward Carolyn.

He glared at her. "Foolish wench!" he shouted, pointing a scaly forefinger at her. A ribbon of flame, this one about six feet long, came crackling out of his mouth.

The flames fell about a dozen feet short of reaching my onetime wife. But they did set fire to one of the Chinese screens.

"Duck!" I suggested and at the same time yanked up an imitation leather hassock and hurled it right at the fire-spouting Shug Ngryz.

Carolyn executed an impressive back flip, the Count Monstrodamus book clutched to her breast, and ducked behind a sofa.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The demon lost his balance, fell over on his backside with a huge thump. That caused another smoldering patch on the carpet.

The onetime priest pulled several religious objects from a pocket, including a white-beaded Rosary and a frayed scapula, and was waving them at the other two demons in an effort to distract them.

Carolyn began reading a spell.

Bray now looked from Carolyn's sofa to the demons to me. "Faith, Kennison, she's fair mangling the Latin," he pointed out. "Not to mention the Sanskrit *and* the Portuguese."

"Best keep silent for a moment," I advised.

The demons kept producing more angry roars. Then two of them commenced shrinking in size.

"Ah, it's the Count's famous spell that shrinks them down till there's nary a trace left," observed Bray. "Not the one I'd have chosen, yet reasonably dependable. Even her butchering of the pronunciation doesn't rob it of its effectiveness."

Shug Ngryz was also diminishing, but at a much slower rate. He took two shaky steps in Carolyn's direction, small spurts of crimson flame dribbling out of his green mouth. Then he halted, stood swaying, groaning. The other demons, now less than a foot high, produced, in turn, loud popping sounds and vanished.

Carolyn, reaching the end of the spell, slammed the big book shut.

When Shug Ngryz reached a height of roughly four feet, he all at once turned into a nearly soundless green explosion, becoming a greenish cloud of demonic dust.

Recalling one of my favorite script lines, I remarked, "That was a close call and we're lucky to be alive."

"Oh, I don't know," said Carolyn with a gratified smile. "It wasn't all that difficult. Had I known I had a real knack for this sort of thing, I wouldn't have had to hire an occult detective at all."

"Keep in mind, my dear, that it was I who removed your lecherous ghost," Father Bray reminded.

"You did, yes," she acknowledged. "I'll pay you for that." She glanced at me. "How long did that take him, Frank? Less than a half hour, I'd estimate. Even so, I'll write him a check for, say, fifty percent of ninety-five dollars, and — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A moment, my dear. My *minimum* fee is ninety-five bucks. Plus you owe me twenty-five dollars for travel expenses, nineteen ninety-five for the holy water, and the toad will run you — "

"I'll find your damn toad and ship him home to you," she assured him. "As for the holy water, I'll buy you a bottle of Evian and you can bless it at your leisure."

"But, dear lady, that — "

"I'll send you a check for all the rest of your expenses, Father," I promised.

"You may be a second-rate writer, but you're a first-rate gentleman." Gathering up his book and his equipment, Bray took his leave.

Carolyn, while straightening up the parlor, said, "Stupid to offer to pay him for all that other — "

"Getting rid of Ulrich was worth it."

"I suppose you're right, Frank." Sitting down on the loveseat, she arranged her copy of the Count Monstrodamus book on the coffee table. "You know, I really do seem to have a talent for this supernatural business. Being around Ulrich, I picked up quite a lot of — "

"Whoa, Carrie. I've written enough movies to know that it's not wise to mess around with things like this."

"I'm pretty certain I can do better than Ulrich," she persisted. "I could summon up a milder demon. One that would do my bidding and not be as surly as Shug Ngryz."

"You really can't deal with demons," I warned. "Besides, I doubt you can find a mild-mannered one."

"My Incontinent Kitten books do very well, but demonic help could make them even bigger sellers and win me the literary prizes that I deserve," she said, crossing her legs. "Ulrich told me once that there are at least three bestselling authors right here in the Greater Los Angeles area who made deals with demons and now they're rolling in — "

"Forget about this."

"And I've got to tell you, dear, nothing short of supernatural assistance is going to get *you* a big budget movie deal."

"No, nope, Carolyn." I said from the rocker where I'd perched. "Anyhow, I've got to get back to my place now to get to work on *Devil Bats of the Amazon: III.*"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"C'mon, Frank." She came over to join me on the chair, causing it to creak and sway. "Considering all you've been through, you might as well stay here tonight."

After a moment (somewhat like the one where Dr. Frankenstein is persuaded to once again revive his monster) I replied, "I suppose so, sure."

She laughed softly, hugging me. "I'm sure you're going to help me on this demon project."

Most times at the end of a movie all the threads are tied up, all the problems solved, lovers are together, killers are in prison. The words *The End* then appear on the screen and everybody goes home, happy, while the final credits are unrolling. In many of my films, the ones where the monster is going to return in another sequel, I don't do that. I use a tag that I'm afraid maybe I ought to use now. *The End... Or Is It?*

COMING ATTRACTIONS

"WE HAVE ALREADY a novella by Bruce Sterling," writes Andres C. on our message board. "Announced are novellas by Gene Wolfe, Lucius Shepard, and a novelet by Ted Chiang. If all this is true, what a year, my God, what a year."

To which Spencer P. adds (after learning of a forthcoming novella by Ian R. MacLeod), "This is definitely going to be a terrific year..."

Thanks, fellas — around here, we agree that 2007 is looking like a good one.

Next month we'll be running one of our special issues — this one's a tribute to the great Gene Wolfe. We've got tributes on hand by Michael Swanwick and Neil Gaiman, an article on Gene Wolfe's short fiction by Michael Andre-Driussi, and best of all, we'll present the aforementioned novella by Mr. Wolfe himself. "Memorare" tells the story of a documentary filmmaker in the future exploring memorials in space — which is more dangerous than it might sound. We think you're going to love this one.

But wait! There's more! We've also got stories in inventory now by A. A. Attanasio, Paolo Bacigalupi, David Gerrold, and Marta Randall. And more — lots more! Don't just take our word for it, listen to Andres and Spencer. They would never steer you wrong!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANZINES (back to 1930), pulps, books. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased. Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

18-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $4.00 or $38 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

Spiffy, jammy, deluxy, bouncy—subscribe to Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. $20/4 issues. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060.

ENEMY MINE, All books in print. Check: **www.barrylongyear.net**

SYBIL'S GARAGE Speculative fiction, poetry, and art. Lee Thomas, Paul Tremblay, Yoon Ha Lee, Kelly Link, and more. *http://www.sensesfive.com/*

RAMBLE HOUSE reprints Hake Talbot, Jack Mann, Cornell Woolrich, Alexander Laing, Max Afford and more. *www.ramblehouse.com* 318-868-8727

www.dargonzine.org—No ads. No fees. Just good fiction. DargonZine is a FREE, full text, online fantasy fiction anthology.

When They Came by DON WEBB, 23 stories, $22.50 postpaid (U.S.A.) Temporary Culture, P.O.B. 43072, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. "Don Webb is a genius." –Bruce Sterling

New entertaining SF novel—HOPLITE RENEGADES — *www.amazon.com/gp/product/0741432641*

Copies of *Nosebleed 2* and *The Mysterious Carton of Chinese Noodles* — improved. The bad guys win! No bootlegs. Check out *ShugNgryzisdaman.com* for full list of prices.

SCARCE copies of the April 2001 F&SF issue printed without periods. Only a few left! "The unperiodical!" $10 ppd. F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Including some collector's items, such as the special Stephen King issue. Limited quantities of many issues going back to 1990 are available. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5, CATTLE 0. The great F&SF contests are collected in *Oi, Robot,* edited by Edward L. Ferman. $11.95 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

Fourth Planet from the Sun, a great collection of stories from *F&SF* about going to Mars! Now, signed hardcover copies available! $17.95 ppd from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

If stress can change the brain, all experience can change the brain. *http://www.undoing stress.com*

Support the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund. Visit *www.carlbrandon.org* for more information on how to contribute.

Space Studies Masters degree. Accredited University program. Campus and distance classes. For details visit *www.space.edu.*

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $2.00 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

DEVIL'S TOR, BY DAVID LINDSAY (1932)

DAVID Lindsay wrote seven novels, and is mostly remembered for his classic *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), whose basic plot has been reworked by authors as various as C. S. Lewis, who Christianized it for *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), and Harold Bloom, who rewrote it as *The Flight to Lucifer* (1979). *Arcturus* is an imaginative tour-de-force, whose overall mood is foreshadowed musically in the first chapter by associations with Mozart's "Magic Flute."

Most of Lindsay's novels have a musical mood to them, and with the exception of *Arcturus*, all of the others are sedate and earthbound. The mood of *Devil's Tor* is that of Wagner — slow, ponderous, and all-encompassing. It concerns the broken pieces of an ancient supernatural talisman associated with the worship of the Great Mother — according to prophecy, when the two pieces are reunited in modern times, it will bring about an uplifting of the human race. On this simple plot Lindsay builds a metaphysical novel filled with considerations of colossal themes such as the purpose of the creation of life, and the role of fate made visible in the world. The breadth of this novel is staggering, and to a reader who can appreciate its mood, the rewards are similarly boundless. Whereas *Arcturus* impresses initially by its flights of imagination and quickness of plot, *Devil's Tor* gives the feeling of the slow movement of a mountain.

E. F. Bleiler described *Devil's Tor* in his *Guide to Supernatural Literature* as "not easy reading, but for massive power there is nothing comparable in English fantastic literature." An astute description for one of Lindsay's undervalued masterpieces.

—Douglas A. Anderson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eos Books—The Next Chapter

Time's Child
Rebecca Ore

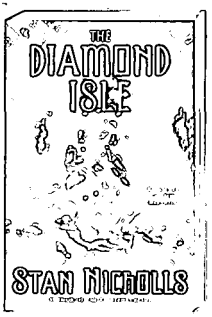
"Madly inventive and full of insight into human foibles."
—Robert Silverberg

Get the Latest News From Eos Books

Visit www.eosbooks.com. While there, sign up for our e-newsletter *Inside Eos* to get updates and exclusive material sent directly to you each month. Can't wait? Head over to our blog at **www.outofthiseos.com** or to Eos Books on MySpace—**www.myspace.com/eosbooks.**

The Diamond Isle
Stan Nicholls

Book Three of
The Dreamtime



"Excellent fantasy with a twist."
—*SFX*

Star Marines
Ian Douglas

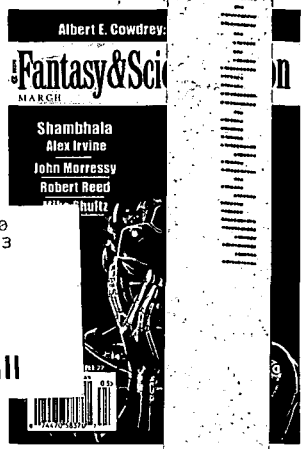
The Legacy Trilogy:
Book Three

The Interstellar Marines will face their most deadly foe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Worlds of Wonder—only $32.97
Subscribe now and save 35%

For little more than the price of a hardcover book, we'll take you into the future with more than 1800 pages of compelling fiction and features: stories by both superstar and rising-star writers, along with lively and informative dep ts on Books, Science, and Films. Your subscription wi de a special anniversary double issue, which alone er 100,000 words of new short stories and novellas. A ou subscribe now, you'll pay only $32.97; that's a s of $18.02, or 35% off the newsstand rate.



☐ **Send me one year at the special low rate of $32.97. I save $18.02 off the newsstand price.**

Name _____

Address _____

City ST Z

#BXNBTBK **********3-DIGIT 440
#44047COLLIJ003# FS FEB09 S60 P3
MRS J COLLING
708 S STATE RT 193
JEFFERSON OH 44047-8498

Out
dra
We

☐ F

☐ Charge my MasterCard/Visa

☐ New ☐ Renewal

Acct No._____

Exp. date _____

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE AT WWW.FSFMAG.COM

Fantasy&ScienceFiction

PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED